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ABSTRACT

This document describes the outcome of a 1999 symposium that was convened to develop the goal, principles, key considerations, and administrative requirements for a student-improvement program in Alberta. Named the Alberta Initiative for School Improvement (AISI), this program is an extension of Alberta's accountability framework that has been in place since the early 1990s. The goal of AISI is to improve student learning and performance by fostering initiatives that reflect the unique needs and circumstances within school jurisdictions. The program includes six partners and has six principles: (1) funding is based upon approved proposals for improving student learning and performance; (2) proposals can be multiyear but must have interim progress-measurement targets; (3) funding is tied to the number of students; (4) jurisdiction proposals must be linked to and become part of the current 3-year planning and reporting process; (5) there will be an appropriate balance of local and provincial measures of performance; and (6) project results will be shared with other school jurisdictions. The 10 articles in this publication present perceptions of the program as held by school boards, superintendents, the Alberta Teachers' Association, parents and school councils, and schools business officials. Opinions of the plan's challenges, as well as its implementation, are also offered. (DFR)

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Alberta Initiative for School Improvement

Opportunities and Challenges

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Alberta Initiative for School Improvement

Opportunities and Challenges

Symposium at the Annual Meeting of the Canadian Society for the Study of Education, Edmonton, Alberta, May 24, 2000

Alberta Initiative for School Improvement
Opportunities and Challenges

Symposium at CSSE 2000

Co-Chairs:

Nelly McEwen & John Myroon, Alberta Learning

Presenters:

Maria David-Evans, Alberta Learning

Lois Byers, Alberta School Boards Association

Ed Wittchen, College of Alberta School Superintendents

Larry Booi & J-C Couture, Alberta Teachers' Association

Christine Ayling & Marilyn Fisher, Alberta Home and School Councils' Association

Deb Beck & Karel Meulenbroek, Association of School Business Officials of Alberta

W. Todd Rogers, University of Alberta

Discussants:

Jerry Heck, Syncrude Canada

Lorna M. Earl, OISE, University of Toronto

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The Alberta Initiative for School Improvement

Nelly McEwen and John Myroon
Alberta Learning

We are pleased to provide an introduction to this symposium on an unprecedented partnership between government and its education partners to improve education in Alberta. We briefly describe the Alberta Initiative for School Improvement (AISI) program, partner collaboration and support to the initiative, and provide a synopsis of the partners' perspectives on the opportunities and challenges AISI presents to their constituents.

AISI was officially announced on December 15, 1999 at a press conference that included all six partners:

- Alberta Learning (AL)
- Alberta Home and School Councils' Association (AHSCA)
- Alberta School Boards Association (ASBA)
- Alberta Teachers' Association (ATA)
- Association of School Business Officials of Alberta (ASBOA)
- College of Alberta School Superintendents (CASS)

Developmental work began on August 26, 1999, when the Minister of Learning, Dr. Lyle Oberg, met with representatives of the above associations to design and develop a successor to the School Performance Incentive Program, which was announced March 11, 1999 as part of the 1999/2000 Budget and put on hold June 9, 1999 as a result of opposition from educators and the community alike. The Minister stated at that time that he would proceed only upon agreement by all partners to an improvement program.

The partners met between August and December 1999 to develop the goal, principles, key considerations, and administrative requirements for a student improvement program in Alberta. In December 1999, the *AISI Framework* and the *AISI Administrative Handbook* were distributed to school authorities and posted on the Alberta Learning website.

The AISI Program

AISI is a bold approach to supporting the improvement of student learning by encouraging teachers, parents and the community to work collaboratively to introduce innovative and creative initiatives based upon local needs and circumstances. AISI rejects the assumptions and premises of incentive-based programs and accepts the basic tenet that an effective school improvement program must be collaboratively planned, developed and implemented by all partners in a climate of trust, flexibility and common purpose.

Through AISI, the Government of Alberta is providing $66 million to public school authorities over each of three years, beginning September 2000. Funded private schools are eligible for 60% of public school funding for an additional $2 million per year. In total, the government is investing more than $200 million in this initiative over the next three years.

AISI is an extension of Alberta's accountability framework that has been in place since the early 1990s. For example, since November 1996, school boards have been reporting to their publics how well their students are performing on a variety of measures (Alberta Learning, 2000). AISI provides funding to school authorities for specific local initiatives to improve student learning and performance. AISI funding is in addition to the basic school grants.

The *goal* of AISI is to improve student learning and performance by fostering initiatives which reflect the unique needs and circumstances within school jurisdictions. It has *six principles:*

1. Funding will flow to school jurisdictions and charter schools based upon approved proposals for improving student learning and performance.
2. Proposals can be multi-year (maximum of three years) but must have interim (at least annual) progress measurement targets. Continued funding depends upon evidence of success.
3. Funding consisting of an equal amount per registered FTE (Full Time Equivalent) student will be based upon the previous year's September 30th enrolment.
4. The jurisdiction proposal needs to be linked to and become part of the current three-year planning and reporting process for purposes of the school jurisdiction's annual planning, reporting and accountability processes.
5. There will be an appropriate balance of local and provincial measures of performance that includes approved quantitative and/or qualitative measures.
6. Project results will be shared with Alberta school jurisdictions and others while Alberta Learning will act as the "clearinghouse" on behalf of all partners.

Further elaboration of the principles is found in the key considerations and clarifications in the AISI framework (AISI Education Partners Steering Committee, 1999). Administrative requirements and local and provincial processes are outlined in the administrative handbook (AISI Education Partners Working Group, 1999).

Each partner is responsible for working with its own constituents to make AISI happen now and in the future. The partners are continuing to collaborate to decide on priorities and to identify issues, changes and enhancements to the AISI program and its processes.

AISI Support

Since January 2000, AISI partners have provided a series of planning supports to school authorities. In January we made 12 overview presentations. In February and early March, we conducted over 20 intensive implementation workshops. In total over 1,000 people participated in these sessions. As well, under the leadership of CASS, the partners organized two sharing symposia (in Edmonton and Calgary) for school jurisdictions. More than 300 people attended these symposia.

A third support is an annotated bibliography posted to the School Improvement Branch website in January to help school jurisdictions begin their literature review. This online resource is fully searchable by author, title, key word, descriptor, and source. A fourth support was to fund the four Faculties of Education (University of Alberta, Faculté Saint-Jean, University of Calgary, and University of Lethbridge) so they could provide direct assistance and information to school authorities requesting advice on related AISI literature, improvement strategies, measures and evaluation, and so forth. A series of thematic workshops is planned for this fall and the AISI Clearinghouse will be developed by the fall of 2001.

Alberta Learning's Help Desk Team is currently assisting AISI school authority project coordinators in accessing the Extranet (a secure site for school authority data) and working through the AISI online application and reporting form. There have been growing pains in implementing this database application, but we believe that the immediate and long-term benefits it provides will outweigh any initial difficulties school authorities may encounter in using it. All School Improvement Branch staff are available by phone, e-mail or fax, for assistance as needed.

In order to assist school authorities in preparing their application forms, a project review and approval process was developed and distributed so that authorities would know exactly how their applications are reviewed. The requirements are outlined in Note 1.

Opportunities and Challenges

This symposium brings together the six partners who discuss the opportunities and challenges they see. As well, three people not involved in the development process provide their perspectives on AISI.

Maria David-Evans, Deputy Minister of Alberta Learning, presents the government's view. She discusses the partnership, the AISI program, collaboration, a culture of continuous improvement, evidence-based practice, and innovation as opportunities. Challenges include capacity building, changing attitudes, time and effort, enhancements, reporting and evaluation. She concludes with the partners' collective agenda for AISI during the 2000/2001 school year.

Lois Byers and Leroy Sloan present the perspective from the Alberta School Boards Association. They credit AISI with increasing trust between education partners and Alberta Learning, serving as a model for collaboration, increasing collaboration among education partners, and increasing the likelihood of research and development becoming embedded in the operations of public school districts. They organize their discussion of challenges around five domains of leadership (authentic, visionary, cultural, quality, and service). By working together, the partners are making a positive difference to the education of Alberta's students.

Art Aitken, Terry Gunderson and Ed Wittchen represent the views of superintendents. Drawing extensively on the current literature on education reform, they discuss how AISI is in tune with current thinking. They discuss opportunities and challenges with respect to leadership, infrastructure, maintaining a focus on students, and promoting a shared vision of learning among people with different beliefs. They see AISI as an opportunity for staff development.

Larry Booi and executive staff present the perspective of the Alberta Teachers' Association. They discuss four types of proposal development, ranging from the collaborative and consensus-building approach in the majority of school authorities, to decentralized and perceived fragmented approaches in a few instances. They conclude that AISI has the potential to have a significant impact on Alberta's education system and that teachers are eager to continue to play a role in improving teaching and learning.

Christine Ayling and Marilyn Fisher represent the parent/school council point of view. They praise the partnership for including the school community and address the nature of school improvement. They acknowledge that AISI involves a lot of work and discuss the tension between "bottom-up and top-down" processes. Their conclusion merits advance notice:

> ... we are thrilled with the possibilities inherent in this project. It breathes life into the concept that it takes a community to raise a child. It validates our vision of the power of partnerships. It demonstrates a change in a way of doing business. Are we there yet? No. Will we get there? Yes! (p. 40)

Karel Meulenbroek presents the perspective of school business officials. He identifies opportunities for improved student learning, collaboration, and the flexibility AISI promises for other government grants. He outlines some of the frustrations presented by the volume of work and administrative changes, and the need to recognize the role of the Auditor General's Office in performance management.

Todd Rogers presents a third-party perspective on AISI. He identifies increased collaboration and cooperation, empowerment, success and transfer as both opportunities and challenges. He cautions partners to look at evidence from other projects in their continuing deliberations and to avoid looking for simple solutions.

Jerry Heck discusses the common themes among the seven perspectives on AISI. He outlines a number of the challenges identified by the presenters and identifies four building blocks for further action in school improvement: translating theory into practice, showing integration, working smarter, not harder, and thinking and reflecting. He challenges school districts and schools to address some of the tough but important areas for school improvement. He also identifies some cautions and future considerations.

Lorna Earl calls AISI a bold venture in school reform. She adopts the role of critical friend and situates AISI in other large-scale reform endeavors. As well, she describes a school reform cycle of urgency, energy, agency, and more energy, and offers a framework for evaluating a large-scale initiative. While recognizing there is cause for celebration at this point in time, she reminds partners that the journey is just beginning and recommends that they:

> ... build the capacities for productive change in schools and create the working environments that will provide long-term support, reflection and celebration. (p. 64)

There is much in common among the perspectives presented in this symposium. We are encouraged that all partners value the collaboration and are focusing on the opportunities that AISI promises. We all recognize that many challenges face us in the months ahead, but together, we can have a profound impact on the education of our children. May our collective wisdom and continuing dedication to the goal of AISI sustain us through the hard work in the months ahead!

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank our Alberta Learning colleagues for their valuable contributions to this report. Anna Di Natale designed and produced this document. Charlotte Landry verified the bibliographic citations. Leslie Sim-Kaiser articulated the benefits of the AISI database application. Dick Meanwell, Alfred Sakyi, Sharon Adams, Deborah Williams, Robyn Keist and Kathy Lazowski commented on earlier versions of the Alberta Learning content.

Note

1. The AISI requirements for project approval are: 1. Project description. 2. School community involvement. 3. Literature and research (citation and application). 4. Improvement goal(s). 5. Support of implementers. 6. Measures, baseline(s) and improvement targets. 7. Strategies. 8. Evaluation methods and data sources. 9. Ongoing support. 10. Staffing requirements. 11. Budget projections. 12. Project expense details. 13. Other funding. 14. Other information. 15. Certification by project coordinator, 16. Certification by superintendent.

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AISI Opportunities and Challenges: The Government's View

Maria David-Evans
Alberta Learning

The Alberta Initiative for School Improvement (AISI) was developed collaboratively by six education partners (Alberta Learning, Alberta School Boards Association, Alberta Teachers' Association, Alberta Home and School Councils' Association, Association of School Business Officials of Alberta, College of Alberta School Superintendents). All six partners are sharing their perspectives on the opportunities and challenges of AISI. I am pleased to present the government's view.

Opportunities

When the Minister of Learning, Dr. Lyle Oberg, first met with the partners to develop a successor to the School Performance Incentive Program that was put on hold, he outlined five expected outcomes of the consultation process:

1. The development of a program that improves student learning and performance.
2. Establishment of a solid foundation of trust between government and stakeholder groups.
3. Creation of a model for future collaboration.
4. Establishment of accountability measures and criteria providing evidence that the initiative works.
5. The expectation that the initiative will be continually improved.

Does AISI meet these expectations? The indications we have so far suggest that it's well on its way.

The Partnership

The AISI partnership has resulted in the building of trust, collaboration, and teamwork among the six education partners who represent diverse interests in providing education for children. This partnership was a major contributing factor in the successful design and development of an exemplary school improvement model. We can take pride in the fact that AISI was developed by Albertans for Albertans in the Alberta context. It represents the collective wisdom of the partners and other stakeholders, who took the opportunity to respond to the draft framework. This collaborative approach is being used as a model for other initiatives, for example, in the Special Education Review.

AISI is client focused in that it responds not only to the needs of the partners and school authorities, but ultimately on "what is good for kids", a question which often became our focus during the developmental work of the partners. It communicates a compelling future of school improvement and aligns with the long-term vision of Alberta Learning – optimizing human potential. The initiative will ultimately influence all 584,000 students in basic learning (K-12) in the province. What we learn through AISI over the next three years will also influence how our future teachers are trained in our universities, and how current teachers receive inservice and professional development in enhancing their instructional repertoires.

The AISI Program

The Government of Alberta is investing more than $200 million in this initiative over the next three years. This makes AISI the largest research and development initiative focused on school improvement that we know of to date. It is an unprecedented opportunity for practitioners to introduce innovations in our schools. The AISI goal – *to improve student learning and performance by fostering initiatives which reflect the unique needs and circumstances within school jurisdictions* – focuses attention on students, while permitting those who deliver education maximum flexibility to address local priorities, needs and conditions.

Financial support for innovation is addressed by providing the funds up-front. Once a school authority submits an application for a project that meets the criteria established collectively by the partners, funding flows in September 2000. The interim report will trigger funding for the second and third years of the project, if targets are being met. This approach allows districts to plan what they want to do, allocate resources to improvement projects, and then implement intervention strategies, if necessary. In other words, they have maximum flexibility and time to nurture each project.

Collaboration

Collaboration is taking place not only among the partners in the design and development of AISI, but also in schools and communities across the province. This is indeed positive. Educators tell me that collaboration is also occurring between district offices and schools, and with school councils. This is a better way of working and all of us should benefit from increased collaboration to improve student learning.

Culture of Continuous Improvement

AISI promotes a culture of continuous improvement for all partners and our children as we help them to be successful learners. "Change is inevitable, growth is intentional" (Glenda Cloud). Sustained and meaningful school improvement requires collaboration, commitment, and effort. Professional development and ongoing administrative support are important elements in helping educators engage in continuous improvement. In his response to an invitation to comment on the proposed framework for AISI, Eric Newell (1999) thought that time, training, planning, commitment, and a willingness to make needed management changes were critical to the success of school improvement efforts (p. 9). He concluded with the following:

> School improvement can be an exciting process. School improvement and renewal are critical to the "Alberta Advantage". It will be a challenge and not for the 'faint of heart'. Infrastructure support and encouragement are essential in this journey. The reward – *good Alberta schools getting better!* (p. 11)

Evidence-based Practice

AISI wants to establish empirical evidence that educational practices benefit student learning and performance. We want to know not only what works, but why and how it can be transferable to other contexts and situations. As the body of evidence on successful practices emerges, government will consider adding improvement funding to base grants for ongoing improvement initiatives. Hence, the possible "short-term pain for long-term gain" applies not only to physical fitness, but also to education reform.

We are encouraging the use of multiple methods and data sources so that we can have confidence in the results. We know that educational improvement is not a "quick fix", but that it takes time and effort. We also know there are numerous factors that affect student learning. What may appear as a decline in a particular measure needs to be investigated in light of the other sources of data we have for judging whether improvement is taking place. We will also learn from those strategies that did not work as predicted in a particular situation. Apparent failures can provide important indications of what needs to change and how another approach might be more successful.

Innovation

School authorities are currently designing and developing their projects. The major themes so far relate primarily to early intervention, early literacy, numeracy, special education, and technology. Because these are all areas that have a solid research base with a reasonable expectation that improvement will occur given the implementation of effective instructional strategies, AISI projects will establish the efficacy of these interventions in the Alberta context.

At the provincial level, we introduced two innovations to assist school authorities: an online annotated bibliography and a database application for planning and reporting to facilitate the work of the initiative over its life span.

- The online *AISI Annotated Bibliography* is the first such Alberta Learning resource to be made available on the Internet. It brings together in one site more than 350 citations related to school improvement and effectiveness. Its fully searchable capability by author, title, key word, descriptor, and source makes it accessible to practitioner and administrator alike. This resource means that busy administrators and practitioners can sign on to our website and search for research literature in their particular area of interest. Citations have been screened so that users can have confidence that the research is meaningful and appropriate.

- The *AISI Online Application Preparation and Submission* on the Extranet is another innovation in which school authorities are able to report their information electronically to Alberta Learning. This database application has many immediate, short-term and long-term benefits. The immediate benefits currently available include:

    1. All project submissions created on the online application allow for electronic workflow processing and automated status reporting.
    2. All projects entered are automatically rolled up into a "summary report" by school authority so that school authorities can provide statistical information for their initiatives.
    3. A provincial AISI contact database is available. Anyone associated with AISI across the province can be contacted either electronically through email, by telephone, or Canada Post.
    4. Management history reporting allows for fair, consistent and accurate assessment of all projects across the province.
    5. Online viewing of approved projects can be undertaken by anyone associated with AISI.

Short-term benefits will be realized within the next six months to one year. Further analysis and continuous improvement will make room for future long-term endeavors. More detailed benefits of this database system are outlined in the appendix.

Challenges

AISI partners have encountered a number of challenges since school authorities began planning their projects. These are largely the inevitable growing pains of any new initiative. We have faced both short- and long-term challenges.

Capacity Building

Alberta Learning sent each school authority the *AISI Framework* and *Administrative Handbook* in December 1999. These materials were also posted on our website so that they are readily accessible to everyone. Beginning in January 2000, 12 overview seminars and 20 detailed workshops were presented on behalf of the partners to more than 1,000 people. The *Annotated Bibliography* was posted to the Internet at the end of January to assist school authorities in identifying appropriate literature for their projects. In February, CASS organized two sharing symposia that brought together more than 300 educators to discuss common themes. Furthermore, Alberta Learning provided funding to the four Faculties of Education in Alberta to provide assistance to school authorities in their research and development activities for planning their projects. The four Faculties have been invited to join the AISI partnership. These efforts to build school authority capacity have been well received by school authorities.

Over the next year and beyond, professional development will continue to be important for all partners – teachers, trustees, business officials, parents, superintendents, faculties of education, and government administrators – to ensure that they benefit from the emerging knowledge, practices, and technologies that are being developed.

Changing Attitudes

Attitudes will need to change about how education partners interact. AISI embodies a collaborative culture in which partners work together, recognizing the validity of different perspectives and finding ways to accommodate diversity. Teachers working on common topics across grade levels and schools will not only enhance their individual and collective capacity within a particular school, but will experience greater sharing, pursuit of a common goal, and better understanding of their role in children's careers through basic education (grades K-12).

Time and Effort

Time is a significant issue both provincially and locally. The proposal stage has been more time consuming than anticipated. The partners, perhaps unrealistically, hoped that the project application forms could be filed by the end of April so that authorities would know by mid-June if their projects are approved. The considerable time commitment is partly a result of the following factors:

- project coordinators working hard to put solid, research-based proposals together
- the technical work required to place the database application on the Extranet

Another issue is timing. April 30 is only one month from the date for submission of the Budget Report and the Annual Education Plan (May 31). While this makes sense in the long term, in the immediate term it created hardships for districts that are developing multiple projects. The spring is typically a busy time for planning and budgeting; the addition of the AISI requirements was just one more thing that needed attention. Alberta Learning will continue to accept proposals beyond the target date.

Many administrators and teachers have commented that although AISI created more work than anticipated, the dialogue on education and the discussion of what is truly important for teaching our children made the effort worthwhile. If the focus on children and learning continues over the duration of the initiative, the money will have been well spent.

Enhancements
As we collectively work through the project application process, we are finding ways to improve our systems. Since the distribution of the *AISI Administrative Handbook* in December, the partners have worked to enhance the project application procedure based on feedback from the field and during the workshops. These enhancements have improved the processes but delayed the application form. An interim Word Document was introduced in March with the final Extranet version posted April 14, 2000.

The two pilot jurisdictions found the database version easy to use and are assisting in helping others. As well, our Help Desk Team has provided online assistance to jurisdictions experiencing difficulty in using the application form. As of May 17, 2000, more than 300 projects are on the database system; 172 of these projects have been submitted to Alberta Learning for approval.

Reporting and Evaluation
Authorities will also use the Extranet application to submit their interim (April 30) and annual (October 15) reports during each of the three years of the initiative, thereby reducing the reporting burden. The interim report will trigger funding for the second and third years of the project; evidence of success for this report may be incomplete but should be sufficient to determine if the project has enough merit to continue funding. The annual report will include all quantitative and qualitative results, and financial details. Interpretation of data will remain an important aspect of deciding whether improvement is taking place, and what adjustments may be necessary.

Evaluation will be an ongoing activity as educators make sense of their results and share them with their communities. Alberta Learning will continue to focus on improving the initiative. The new System Improvement and Reporting Division of Alberta Learning will monitor the success of the processes. At the end of the three years, an external contractor will undertake a comprehensive summative evaluation of AISI.

Agenda for the Future

Over the next year the partners will need to reflect on the experiences of this developmental year of AISI, and identify areas that require fine-tuning. Partners have agreed to the following provincial activities during the 2000/2001 school year.

1. Development of a **Clearinghouse** to accommodate all the proposals, results, conclusions, and promising practices so that all educators can share information.

2. Province-wide **professional development** activities along a thematic approach. Sharing information on common themes will continue the collaborative approach and engage educators in ongoing dialogue on school improvement across the province. Measurement and interpretation of findings are areas that come to mind for shared professional development.

3. Province-wide **surveys** to determine the perceptions of all participants in AISI. It is important to survey representative samples of participants so that their perspectives can be used to improve the processes during the second and third years of the initiative. Perceptions of strengths and areas requiring improvement can inform decisions regarding changes.

4. **Continued funding** to the four Faculties of Education to provide basic services to the school authorities for their AISI projects. Many school jurisdictions availed themselves of these services during the planning and development phases of their projects.

5. Invitations to the four Faculties of Education in Alberta to choose one dean to represent the **academic community** on the Education Partners Steering Committee during AISI implementation.

6. **Communication** of information by each partner to its constituents so that all partners are informed. If we are to grow both personally and professionally, we must continue to share information through the many communication vehicles available, like conferences such as this one, through writing articles and reports, meetings, and any opportunities to share the good news.

7. **Celebration of success** is important. We must take opportunities such as this symposium to celebrate how much we have actually accomplished since we began in 1999. It is nine months since the Minister first met with the partners to develop AISI. Like a newborn, AISI has unlimited potential. Let's nurture our baby and commemorate its milestones.

AISI is a **catalyst** that will benefit student learning and the entire education system. I am honored to have chaired the group of education leaders and partners who designed and developed AISI. I look forward to the other AISI partners' views on the opportunities and challenges they see at this time.

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Appendix: AISI Online Application Preparation and Submission

AISI Database Application Team
Information Services
Alberta Learning

The AISI online application and database has many immediate, short-term and long-term benefits.

The **immediate benefits** that are currently available include:

1. All project submissions created on the online application allow for electronic workflow processing and automated status reporting.
   a. AISI coordinators can create, modify and fine-tune the projects in the format that is to be submitted to Alberta Learning.
   b. When they have completed their submissions, they may submit the projects to their superintendent for approval. The system automatically emails the superintendent and identifies those projects that are ready for his/her approval. The superintendent may then view the project submission in the "approved" format and either approve it to be submitted to Alberta Learning or return it to the coordinator for further revisions. Again, email is sent to the appropriate party indicating next steps in the process.
   c. Once the project is electronically submitted to Alberta Learning and automatically notified through email, reviewers can do an initial review to ensure that all of the information has been submitted and the status is changed to "under review". As the project goes through the review process, SIB staff update the status so that school authorities know at any given time where their project is in the review process (i.e., under review, second review, panel of partners). This allows for more time efficiencies both for the school authority and SIB.

d. The project may be electronically returned to the school authority for certain information to be "qualified". Alberta Learning may have the AISI coordinator make the changes; if the change is minor, it will be resubmitted into the review process by SIB staff. If the changes are substantial, they will need to be re-approved by the superintendent prior to the review carrying forward. However, the "priority" of the project remains the same because the online application tracks the history of project submission and SIB staff have management reports which inform them of any particular project's priority in the "review queue". In other words, all status and submission times are tracked for each project and projects are managed on a "first in first out" basis.
e. Once a project is approved, ALL parties associated with a project are notified electronically of its "approved" status.

2. All projects entered into the online application are automatically rolled up into a "summary report" by school authority so that school authorities can provide statistical information across their authority for such information as:
   a. The kinds of projects that have been created
   b. The types of measures being utilized
   c. The number of students involved
   d. The number of schools involved
   e. The age and grade levels (number of projects associated with each)
   f. The focus and targets (number of projects associated with each)
   g. Total "AISI" staff needs
   h. Summary of AISI Financial – Estimated and Actual

3. A provincial AISI contact database is available. Anyone associated with AISI across the province can be contacted either electronically through email, by telephone, or Canada Post.

4. Management history reporting for SIB allows for fair, consistent and accurate assessment of all projects across the province.

5. Online viewing of approved projects can be viewed by anyone associated with AISI.

The following **short-term benefits** should be available within the next six months to one year:

1. Financial rollup at the school authority level allows SIB to manage funding more efficiently and effectively. The School Finance Branch will then receive accurate and timely information so that school authorities will receive the appropriate amounts of funding in a timely fashion.

2. Financial rollup information at the provincial level allows SIB to manage funding more efficiently and effectively for all government fiscal accountability measures.

3. The "summary report" at the school jurisdiction level will be expanded to the provincial level. It will also have drilldown capabilities to allow the user to see how the aggregated information was calculated and to allow for focus and target relationship reporting.

4. Statistical reporting will be created for use by the school authorities, Alberta Learning and any other appropriate stakeholders.

5. The annual reporting will be made easier as the project proposals are on the database already and the school authorities will then only be required to provide "actual" figures and project update information. Again electronic workflow and submission processing will assist in the management and analysis of changes and updates as required.

Further analysis and continuous improvement will make room for **future long-term endeavors.** These long-term endeavors could include but are not limited to the following:

1. Online bibliographic inquiry facility as it relates to projects operating in the province.
2. Quantitative and qualitative measures feasibility analysis reports.
3. An online "query" driven clearinghouse to accommodate all proposals, results, conclusions and promising practices.
4. An online "query" driven professional development database with appropriate and corresponding results and commentary.
5. Other electronic information sharing facilities, which the continuous improvement process will flush out as the process develops and information is shared among all AISI partners.

AISI Opportunities and Challenges: The School Board Perspective

Lois Byers and Leroy Sloan
Alberta School Boards Association

The Alberta School Boards Association's (ASBA) perspective on the Alberta Initiative for School Improvement (AISI) focuses on ASBA's interests, perceived opportunities and perceived challenges. ASBA viewed AISI and its forerunner, the School Performance Incentive Program (SPIP), through a perceptual screen formed by the association's mission statement, strategic plan, pillars, and policies. Challenges and opportunities associated with AISI are best understood by examining the interests of ASBA as articulated in these documents.

ASBA Interests

ASBA is the provincial voice for all school boards, which includes all Francophone, separate, and public school boards in the province of Alberta. The four pillars of ASBA are: 1. advocacy; 2. cooperative ventures such as the Alberta School Employee Benefit Plan, Jubilee Insurance, and Alarie Insurance; 3. professional development for trustees; and 4. services to individual boards provided on an equitable fee-for-services basis. These services include labor relations, legal, and management services.

During 1998 three boards, Edmonton School District No. 7, Calgary School District No. 19, and Red Deer School District No. 104, gave notice to withdraw from ASBA. In response to these notices, the organization launched a comprehensive review process called Check-up.

ASBA Strategic Plan

This Check-up process culminated in a report containing numerous recommendations, which were all subsequently addressed in ASBA's three-year strategic plan. Funds from reserves were allocated to support these initiatives. As a result of these actions, all three boards voted in 1999 to remain with the ASBA.

The Strategic Plan focuses on four major areas:

1. *Leadership and Governance* includes reaffirming a compelling vision for ASBA's future, scanning the educational and political environment for emerging issues and trends, clarifying roles and direction, and providing for timely and meaningful input.

2. *Advocacy* is made possible by creating increased understanding among boards so that ASBA can speak with a strong voice. Advocacy also includes establishing issues and priority areas each year, which is the primary focus for ASBA's advocacy/lobbying activities. These issues are addressed by enhancing strategic linkages with partner organizations including Alberta Learning, Alberta Catholic School Trustees Association, Public School Boards Association of Alberta, College of Alberta School Superintendents, Association of School Business Officials of Alberta, Alberta Home and School Councils' Association, and the Alberta Teachers' Association. These linkages are to ensure proactive responses to and effective management of emerging educational issues. Increasing funding is identified as one major advocacy issue.

3. *Member Services* involves building on the positive assessment of current services and increasing trustee professional development.

4. *Communications* involves the development of an annual issues management strategy to respond effectively to emerging issues and related public relations and communications needs. The communication section of the Strategic Plan also speaks to keeping MLAs better informed regarding ASBA positions on important educational issues, and to providing timely information to boards on important, emerging issues.

ASBA Policies

In addition to ASBA's interests and direction articulated in the Strategic Plan, the association is guided in its work on AISI by policies, which are developed at annual general meetings each year by the entire membership. For example, policy 4.L.01 states, "The ASBA believes that the current level for funding of education does not meet the needs of students in ECS to grade 12" (ASBA, 1999, p. 40). Policy 4.L.07 states, "The ASBA believes targeted funding should be minimized and additional funding for school boards should acknowledge initiatives that boards already have in place" (p. 41).

ASBA Mission

The mission statement also provides direction:

> Dedicated to the betterment of Alberta's public education systems through collective action, the ASBA:
> - promotes responsiveness to student needs in a manner that is respectful of parental and community expectations;
> - advocates governance by locally elected trustees acting corporately;
> - provides service to member boards through information, advice and advocacy;
> - pursues the creation of coalitions for provincial and national representations.
>
> (ASBA, 1999, p. 41)

When the School Performance Incentive Program (SPIP) was announced, ASBA could not support the proposed program. Though committed to increased funding for public education and to the concept of accountability, the association could not accept the principle of incentive funding. As one trustee stated, "If you have two children and one is doing extremely well in school and the other is performing poorly, would you hire a tutor for the one who is excelling?" Other trustees believed that the restructuring and budget reductions of the previous few years had left boards with no flexibility to fund new initiatives. ASBA's actions in regard to AISI and SPIP are consistent with the commitments outlined in the ASBA mission statement, pillars, policies, and strategic plan.

ASBA is a mission-driven organization that involves all trustees in twice-yearly general meetings to develop policy directions. The association has strongly affirmed its commitment to strategic planning and the current plan was born out of a challenge to ASBA's very existence as the provincial voice for all Alberta school boards. The association has demonstrated a commitment to creating coalitions as noted in its mission statement. Strong coalitions are created out of common purpose. In regard to AISI, the association found other provincial education partners also sought to work in partnership for the betterment of Alberta's public education system. The common purpose focused on a rejection of incentive programs and a shared commitment to embrace and be accountable for an improvement program.

The Board of Directors' proactive stances were affirmed at the spring annual general meeting when the following motion was passed:

> The ASBA endorses the actions taken by the Board of Directors with respect to the Alberta School Improvement Program and supports continued discussions with school boards, education stakeholders, and the Government of Alberta to develop a program which serves the interests and needs of our students and our communities. (ASBA, 1999, p. 41)

When the Government of Alberta responded with a willingness to pursue an improvement program, ASBA was an eager participant.

Opportunities

The AISI program is a $200 million improvement program. The lack of successful models of incentive programs stands in stark contrast to the success of continuous quality improvement and school improvement efforts. Recognition of the key role played by local school boards is evident in AISI, as it is boards that determine submissions to be forwarded for approval.

ASBA recognizes that if change efforts are to be successful, there must be buy-in and commitment on the part of those who will implement the change. Therefore, boards have involved partners at the local level to ensure resources are directed to local needs. Respect for the role of local boards is further evidenced in the inclusion of both local and provincial measures of success.

Building on the success of recent early literacy programs, boards are committed to increasing success for identifiable groups of students. One size does not fit all. Elected local boards of education play a vital part in providing quality public education as they are best able to respond to local priorities and needs.

At this point, AISI has no measurable results in terms of student success. It has engendered the following:

1. Increased trust between education partners and Alberta Learning.
2. Served as a model of collaboration that is being replicated with other educational issues.
3. Demonstrated government respect for locally elected boards.
4. Increased funding for a cash-strapped school system.
5. Based improvement efforts on research as opposed to advocacy.
6. Increased collaborative work among education partners.
7. Increased the likelihood of true research and development becoming embedded in the operations of public school districts.

Challenges

AISI has yet to prove its worth in terms of increasing student success. The Education Partners Working Group has attempted to minimize paperwork and administrative overhead by working proactively with the Auditor General and Alberta Learning. All parties must remain vigilant to ensure the focus is on applying research-based practice and on obtaining positive student outcomes.

The challenges associated with implementing AISI are common to the challenges associated with implementing almost any educational change. In their book, *Total Leaders*, Schwahn and Spady (1998) apply the best future-focused change strategies to education. They identified five domains of leadership: authentic, visionary, cultural, quality, and service. For each domain they identified the mind set of leaders in that domain and the change belief that predicts when effective change will occur. The work of Schwahn and Spady addresses five key challenges for boards as they attempt to implement AISI. Table 1 summarizes some key points for each domain.

Table 1: Conditions for Implementing Effective Change

Domain	Guru	Exemplar	Mind Set	Change Belief
Authentic	Stephen Covey	Mahatma Gandhi	It is only when one has become an authentic, value-driven person that he or she is able to morally and effectively lead others.	Change happens when there is a compelling reason to change.
Visionary	Warren Bennis	Walt Disney	Vision and leadership are synonymous. If you're not a visionary, at best, you're a manager.	Change happens when people are able to see a concrete picture of the future.
Cultural	Terry Deal	Red Auerbach & Boston Celtics	Organizational culture is the critical variable in the long-term success of organizations.	Change happens from the inside out when individuals are involved in, and thereby become committed to, the change.
Quality	W. Edwards Deming	Marvin Runyon	High-quality products and services are no longer a market advantage but an entrance requirement.	Change happens when individuals and teams have the capacity to implement the vision.
Service	Robert Greenleaf	Mother Theresa	People are our most important resource, and they'll do the "right thing right" if they get support.	Change happens, and is sustained, when people are supported in making the change.

Note. From *Total Leaders* by Schwahn and Spady, 1998 (pages 34, 50, 66, 84, 102).

1. *Authentic Leadership.* The mind set of such leaders is that "it is only when one has become an authentic, value-drive person that he or she is able to morally and effectively lead others. The change belief is that "change happens when there is a compelling reason to change" (p. 34).

   The challenge of making AISI effective in bringing about increased student success is great. First there must be a compelling reason for participants to change. The collaborative processes modeled in AISI's development will have to be augmented by meaningful dialogue at the local level to ensure funded programs are believed to be authentic by those who work most directly to bring about improvements. In some instances, old ways of thinking and defeatist attitudes will have to be challenged and success stories profiled to create a greater source of hope and to reveal compelling reasons to commit the substantial efforts required to bring about meaningful improvement.

2. *Visionary Leadership.* The mind set is that "vision and leadership are synonymous. If you're not a visionary, at best, you're a manger." The change belief of visionary leaders is that "change happens when people are able to see a concrete picture of the future" (p. 50).

The partners at the local level will need to create a shared vision of a preferred future that moves beyond wishful thinking to include agreed-upon pathways to success if AISI is to be successfully implemented.

3. *Cultural Leadership.* The mind set of such leaders is that "organizational culture is the critical variable in the long-term success of organizations." The change belief is that "change happens from the inside out when individuals are involved in, and thereby become committed to, the change" (p. 66).

   Involving all partners is not always easy. Barriers of geography, distance, and history in some instances will have to be overcome. ASBA supports the need to involve all partners both provincially and locally. This is reflected in Key Consideration #1 in the *AISI Framework* (Education Partners Steering Committee, 1999).

   > Given that collaboration is an essential element for school improvement, proposals should reflect support of those who will implement the projects and include meaningful involvement of the school community. (p. 4)

4. *Quality Leadership.* The mind set of such leaders is that "high-quality products and services are no longer a market advantage but an entrance requirement." The change belief of quality leaders is that "change happens when individuals and teams have the capacity to implement the vision" (p. 84).

   For AISI to succeed, capacity will have to be increased. The height of folly is to do the same thing and expect different results. Professional development is not an expense but an investment in our most valuable resource. Such professional development must include teachers, administrators, and trustees. Clarification #4 of the *AISI Framework* states that "school jurisdictions should recognize the importance of professional development in the school improvement process" (p. 5).

5. *Service Leadership.* The mind set of such leaders is that "people are our most important resource, and they'll do the 'right thing right' if they get support." The change belief of service leaders is that "change happens, and is sustained, when people are supported in making the change" (p. 102).

   Change is rarely a comfortable process. Support of those involved in change includes affirmation and celebration of interim successes. Successful change needs nurturing. Providing up-front funding was the key support provided to increase the likelihood of AISI success. The Clearinghouse will no doubt also serve as a support as successes are profiled across the province.

Conclusion

The challenges identified do not present insurmountable barriers. Those who openly address such implementation issues increase markedly the probability that AISI will result in improved student success.

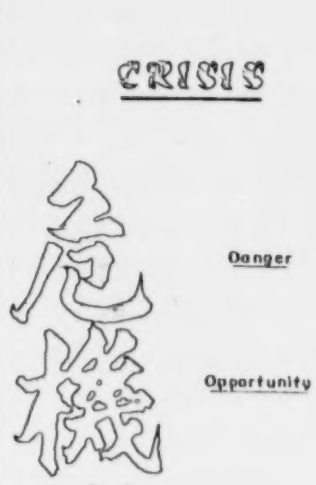
ASBA is committed to working collaboratively with education partners to increase student success. We believe boards must be accountable for results achieved. We also believe increased funding of public education must be a priority, and that continuous quality improvement must be a way of life for boards and staff. Such improvement includes the professional development of trustees and the use of research-based strategies.

School boards play a critical role in ensuring AISI projects make a positive difference for students. The key considerations outlined in the *AISI Framework* reinforce collaboration and the need to engender commitment of those who will implement the initiatives. The considerations also reinforce the need to ensure projects are based on research and current literature on improvement. They also allow for local measures and an exit door if projects are not achieving intended results. This further reinforces the notion of a commitment to improvement.

To make AISI effective, boards need to ask key governance questions such as:

1. What improved student learning will occur as a result of each AISI project?
2. What will be done to bring about this improved learning?
3. Do those involved support the project?
4. Has there been meaningful input from the school and community?
5. Do the projects reflect insights from research and literature on improvement?
6. What measures will be used to evaluate progress?

The Chinese symbol for crisis consists of two characters. One means danger, the other opportunity. ASBA has faced recent crises with an open recognition of the dangers inherent in them, but has chosen to seek opportunities to work with partners to find ways to further our mission of bettering Alberta's public education systems through collective action, exercising the legitimate role of elected boards and serving our member boards to promote responsiveness to student needs in a manner that is respectful of parental and community expectations. All AISI partners have worked hard to develop an initiative that has the potential to make a profound difference in the lives of Alberta's students. The key work of boards is to ensure all AISI projects will do just that. Together we are making a positive difference.



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AISI and the Superintendent: Opportunities for New Relationships

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In December 1999, Alberta's Minister of Learning announced details of a school improvement initiative designed to provide school systems with the necessary funding to enable them to undertake locally developed improvements. The Alberta Initiative for School Improvement (AISI) was established in partnership with six key stakeholders in education in Alberta: Alberta Learning, the Alberta Teachers' Association, the Alberta Home and School Councils' Association, the Alberta School Boards Association, the Association of School Business Officials of Alberta, and the College of Alberta School Superintendents.

In June 1999, the newly appointed Minister of Learning cancelled an incentive program that had been announced as part of the March 1999 budget. In terminating this program the Minister stated that he was responding to the disenchantment about the purpose and anticipated effects of the program. This incentive program was intended to financially reward school systems for improved results, and on this basis the school superintendents had protested that the "carrot and stick" approach did little to improve learning and had the potential to erode rather than build positive relationships. The Minister was determined to find a replacement that was built on collaborative relationships and that was acceptable to the education stakeholders.

The Alberta Initiative for School Improvement signals the first serious attempt in Alberta to cultivate school improvement since the regionalization movement and subsequent decentralization of January 1995 – an endeavor that addressed governance as the trigger to improvement. AISI was founded on six principles that were intended to foster the potential of school systems to identify their unique issues and to design improvement projects at the grassroots level to address those issues. A significant cornerstone of the initiative is that funding is available in advance and is intended to be based on a three-year program. This funding plan and its relationship with continued evidence of success is viewed as a substantial effort to maintain the sustainability of the improvement effort. Other principles in the process have been incorporated such that school systems can link the project to their existing three-year goals, and to planning, measuring and reporting efforts. Some considerations underlying the initiative require that projects be linked to insights gleaned

from research and literature on improvement, and further that collaboration form the essence of the initiative by enhancing meaningful involvement of the school community.

Education Reform

Many Alberta superintendents and other educators who have worked in the profession since the 1960s have developed a skeptical view of reform (Townsend, 1998, p. 33). According to Lieberman and Miller (2000), the same is true for many educators across North America. "Weary of the agendas for change that regularly appear almost every 10 years, they tend to distrust innovations offered by researchers who purport to have found the 'one best way' to solve an enduring problem. Teachers have found that generalizations that are guided by empiricism don't attend to issues faced in *my* classroom with *my* students" (p. 49). Alberta teachers frequently challenge the belief that policies and practices rooted in research can be mandated and adopted as wholesale solutions.

Many reform initiatives and innovations have failed to take root in Alberta because of this rational-linear approach. Open area classrooms and whole language are two such examples. Lieberman and Miller (2000) suggest that an alternative view about how to change practice in classrooms has also been around a long time. "This position holds that contexts are critical and that organizational and personal change has to do with the meaning and enactment of changes in schools" (p. 49). These authors claim that in this approach, developing new ways of working and thinking, and creating new roles and relationships, are important. Teachers have typically been exposed to both approaches to change and improvement recognizing "... that there is knowledge that is created by research that needs to be implemented; and that there is knowledge that is created in the process of action and reflection on practice" (*ibid.*). Neither approach has led to far-reaching, deep-seated school reform in Alberta. AISI has the potential to reconcile the two approaches, borrowing what is best and worthy from each, to move the school reform agenda forward and to motivate Alberta educators so that a fundamental rethinking of the organization and practice of teaching is possible. This approach also addresses the need for reflective practice that is cited in the Alberta Teaching Quality Standard (Alberta Education, 1998).

Opportunities

AISI is a breath of fresh air. AISI, as redesigned, has given us a time to refocus on what is really important and that is student achievement. For the first few years after regionalization, superintendents were caught up in the process and aftermath of restructuring educational governance. We had to rely on our "frontline" people to virtually survive on their own while we spent our time in a quasi-political milieu sorting out all kinds of things.

AISI has allowed us to get into educational research – to dust off research we knew about but couldn't address and to delve into the most recent literature. How refreshing to actually talk about improved practice! We will now be able to accomplish action research in our classrooms. We can experiment with the very best of brain-based research to reach every student in our care. We can practice different ways of opening the emotional gate so cognitive processes can work at optimum levels. We can truly investigate methods of teaching all students who are physically and mentally capable to read and read well. We can explore how numeracy concepts are best taught and learned. Our classrooms can be one giant research laboratory.

The process has reconnected central services personnel with schools in a way reminiscent of the approach prior to 1994. Teams of teachers and support staff are working hand in hand with directors and consultants to produce very creative and innovative proposals. Grassroots involvement has been so important for future success and collaboration has been an outstanding renewal exercise. Opportunities for informal and even more formal leadership of various projects abound. Professional development is a necessary and logical component of the projects. Stronger more resilient staff with more specific professional growth plans will result. This is truly renewal at its best.

Challenges

Change will bring challenge. There will be a real need to build capacity, to take care of the balance between production and production capability as Covey (1990) puts it. There will be a need to encourage risk-taking within parameters. There will be a need to measure things we have not always been accustomed to or comfortable measuring. There will be a much greater need for cooperation with our universities in teacher training, in research activities, and in leadership development.

The greatest challenge may be in the connection of cognitive processes with the affective domain. This will undoubtedly disturb some purists. There will be a need to change some attitudes along the way. Administrators will need to continue down the path of facilitation, in reducing and removing barriers, and in serving those who deliver the actual activities in learning.

AISI and Reform Literature

AISI is very much in tune with current thought about education reform. We discuss leaderships, infrastructure, focus on student learning, and vision.

Leadership
Alberta superintendents have long recognized the virtues of practicing transformational leadership. Leithwood, Janzi, Silins, and Dart (1992), Lambert (1998), and Fullan (2000) inspire us to build our leadership around common purpose, shared commitment, and clearly understood values. The transformational leadership proponents promote a shared

model of emergent leadership that is responsive to purpose and based on mutual trust. Johnson (1996) speaks to the complexities of this leadership, "In fact *top* and *bottom* will come to have little meaning as communication begins to move in many directions and patterns of communication start to resemble dense webs rather than simple chains" (p. 274). AISI encourages participants in groups as varied as school councils, teaching teams, school administrators, and student councils to examine issues and build solutions and thereby be empowered to act constructively in their various functions.

The AISI projects are intended to focus upon district-wide visions and plans, to enable individuals to reassess needs, reinterpret goals, and redesign strategies for use in their own classrooms and schools. If AISI projects are undertaken in this manner, influence may emanate from all parts of school systems, which will enhance newly formed relationships and generate a renewed commitment to learning. Johnson (1996) states, "Collaborative leadership of this sort builds shared purpose, deepens commitment to improvement, and helps coordinate strategies for action. It permits variation and encourages adaptation, making reform possible" (p. 281). She sees the relationship between the superintendent and school improvement as one that is founded in the formation of new relationships. "When superintendents achieve transformational leadership, traditional power relations between superiors and subordinates are changed, and the organization is transformed from one focussed on maintenance to one that is poised for improvement" (*ibid.*, p. 149).

Hargreaves and Fink (2000) propose that the three key components to successful school reform are depth, length and sustainability. The AISI direction to improve student learning and performance suggests a focus on improving important or deeper matters rather than superficial aspects of student learning. The program is also attempting to address sustainability over longer periods of time by extending the funding beyond one year and by enabling modeling of successful projects. By establishing Alberta Learning as a clearinghouse for province-wide sharing of successful initiatives, the AISI program meets the third criterion in Hargreaves and Fink's model for success.

Infrastructure

Moffett (2000) and Brown and Moffett (1999) advocate that successful improvement needs to be supported by an infrastructure that facilitates the change process. Such an infrastructure comprises a vision, communication enhancements, opportunities for people development, flexibility to respond to local needs, and action research based on reflection. The AISI program potentially provides superintendents with this infrastructure but these parameters need to be emphasized in the development stage of each project. DuFour and Eaker (1998) and Fullan (2000) argue that the prerequisite component to this infrastructure involves nurturing professional learning communities. The learning community literature places a heavy emphasis on professional development that enables teachers to respond more successfully to the needs of students and to sustain positive change. DuFour and Eaker infer that there is a symbiotic relationship between success and self-efficacy and that the most critical question that educators must confront

in creating a professional learning community is, "Do we believe in our collective capacity to create a better future for our school?" (p. 286)

Focus on Student Learning

One of the challenges facing Alberta superintendents in implementing AISI is to maintain the focus on the goals that truly speak to enhancing learning for students. If the 'depth' referred to by Hargreaves and Fink (2000) is ignored, many of the AISI projects have the potential to degenerate into mere resource lists and subsequently the opportunities for improvement will be missed. The whole idea of nurturing professional learning communities is contingent upon a sustained and committed effort. Schmoker (1996) captures the essence of the danger of a superficial approach. "Do we want schools to continue merely adopting innovations or do we want schools to improve?" (p. 48)

Deal and Peterson (1999) link successful improvement to leadership that creates a supportive spirit-filled school culture. They show how leaders can harness the power of school culture to build a lively, cooperative spirit and a sense of community. "Schools won't become what students deserve until cultural patterns and ways are shaped to support learning" (p. 137).

AISI provides the vehicle for a thorough, long-term, cultural transformation and builds in opportunities for short-term measurable successes. These successes will result in cultural change and embody change's most important feature – a focus toward achievement and improved performance. It is essential that Alberta's AISI program enhance the reciprocal processes of leadership – reflection, inquiry, dialogue, and action – and that these become integrated into the daily patterns of life in our schools.

A Common Vision

Tyack and Cuban (1995) indicate that the innovations that have the best chance of succeeding are those that have a constituency grow around them. When parents, teachers and school boards all support an initiative, it begins to have a chance to succeed. A lot of people think that, because they have been in schools that they understand teaching, but the real complexity of the classroom is not clear to them. As a result, non-educators are often the ones setting the policies and, as a result, the attempts to change teaching and learning have often had a very short-term or inconsequential effect. Thus, a critical challenge for superintendents lies in the paradox of creating a common vision among people with different beliefs and assumptions about education. Hatch (1998) describes people involved in school improvement efforts as jugglers who suddenly have to figure out how to toss the balls to each other (p. 522).

Staff Development

The reality for superintendents is that in the last two decades we have amassed an extensive body of knowledge about sustaining educational improvement. Sustaining improvement initiatives requires district-level leadership and a reform support infrastructure (Ucelli, 1998). The challenge is to overcome some of the barriers in order to develop this infrastructure. It means taking a lead role in changing practices, reorganizing communications, and effectively deploying resources in order to develop and maintain a collaborative team. School districts must identify and change dysfunctional structures and practices so that improvement initiatives can proceed unencumbered by such factors as low trust, turf protection and competing priorities (Fullan, 1993, 1999).

Perhaps the biggest opportunity being presented to superintendents is that of being able to change the culture of staff development. If AISI projects only demand more accountability from teachers without supplying them the tools, they are destined to fail. The effects of improved staff development are not readily apparent but if it is not a key component, the failure rate of projects will be apparent. While initiatives demand more accountability from teachers, they seldom address ways to improve, increase or fund staff development. Superintendents will need to stay the course in providing regular, ongoing, job-embedded staff development necessary for teachers to develop the new knowledge, skills and strategies to implement and sustain successful AISI projects (Fullan, 1993, p. 85).

In addition, superintendents will face the challenge that will occur when their "implementation dip" occurs, as it surely will. When teachers transfer the knowledge and skills from the staff development stage to the classroom, things often get worse before they get better. The amount of leadership shown during this phase can and will make the difference between failure and success (Joyce & Showers, 1988). We will need to reconcile our target goals with real gains in student achievement. Often we talk about goals that in fact may not represent any gains in student achievement. The superintendents of this province are onside and up to the challenges presented by the AISI opportunity.

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AISI Opportunities and Challenges from the Perspective of the Alberta Teachers' Association

Larry Booi, Charles Hyman, Gordon Thomas and J-C Couture
Alberta Teachers' Association

Background

Right from the start, this is a story of opportunities and challenges. When the Provincial Treasurer announced the establishment of the School Performance Incentive Program (SPIP) in the 1999 provincial budget, there was much interest. The payment of up to four percent of employee salaries as some form of incentive was an intriguing concept. Any "new" money in the cash-starved, underfunded public education system would be an opportunity and difficult to dismiss. However, as the details became clearer, SPIP was meant to be a kind of bonus payment for teachers and other school employees. In fact, SPIP was perceived as "merit pay in drag"; it proposed employee bonuses for improved standardized test scores, graduation rates, and other provincial measures. As far as Alberta's teachers were concerned, it was "dead on delivery": there was no way the teaching profession could support a program that would pay incentives for improved standardized test scores (Annual Representative Assembly, 1999).

Throughout the government's materials on SPIP was a clear commitment to improvement. While conceived as an incentive program, key to the program was annual improvement over the previous year's performance. The Alberta Teachers' Association (ATA) liked the concept of improvement but did not like the packaging of incentives. Like the ATA, the other education partners (Alberta School Boards Association, Alberta Home and School Councils' Association and College of Alberta School Superintendents) did not agree with the focus on incentives but were interested in funding enhancements that could be used to improve student learning. These education partners came together and worked out an alternative program for consideration by government. The heart of the alternative was school improvement research literature. Given the body of knowledge about school improvement, the partners proposed an alternative to SPIP that would follow what is known about how to improve schools. The proposed alternative Alberta School Improvement Program (ASIP) stated that school improvement programs:

- are grassroots driven
- develop commitment and buy-in
- require up-front funding

- use proven research to produce results and provide opportunities for teamwork, innovation and creativity (ASIP, 1999).

The Alberta Initiative for School Improvement

While the alternative to SPIP was not adopted by the Alberta Government, the new Minister of Learning, Dr. Lyle Oberg, put SPIP on hold and brought the partners together to chart an initiative that everyone could live with. In doing so, the Minister made clear that he would not proceed with an initiative that did not have the support of the education partners. The Alberta Initiative for School Improvement (AISI) was the result. The format for the development of AISI was a model of collaboration and presented an excellent opportunity for government to rebuild trust with education partners. From the outset, the education partners have *owned* AISI and Alberta Learning has taken on the role of a partner. In fact, the role of the department has been a critical element to the success of the project to date. By sharing ownership, the department is modeling some of the very qualities it expects the other partners to model as the school improvement initiative proceeds. This reality cannot be underestimated in the process of rebuilding a level of trust between government and the education partners.

Suffice it to say that the ATA strongly endorses AISI and the collaborative process used to get there. Convincing the government that an incentive program was the wrong approach was a huge challenge but there is a tremendous opportunity in AISI. With the opportunity come new challenges to get the program right so it has the most powerful impact on improving teaching and learning.

Challenges and Opportunities of Day-to-Day AISI

Since its approval by Cabinet, attention has shifted from the actual nature of the program, the consultation process, and funding issues to the process of completing project proposals. Now, together, the six education partners get to practice what we have collectively preached and collectively designed. The process of proposal development is nearing completion and is both a challenge and an opportunity. The AISI framework makes clear the expectation that school improvement proposals must be based on solid research and have the support of those who will implement the project, including the wider school community. This can be a difficult task. Some teachers have complained about the extra work required to develop AISI proposals, noting that education is underfunded and that the money could be easily spent if it were simply incorporated into base grants. Some superintendents and trustees have expressed this view as well.

The current challenge is to ensure that proposed projects capture the full potential of the initiative. This is not yet possible to gauge, but there are both potential successes and problems. Based on feedback from ATA professional development chairs, economic policy chairs, local presidents and members of the association's executive staff and executive council, proposal development can be described in four ways[1].

1. *Collaboration, System Leadership and Consensus Building.* In many jurisdictions, AISI has been a model of collaboration. In fact, these jurisdictions have tried to model the provincial government's efforts at collaboration, where every education partner's concerns are systematically addressed. These approaches include system-wide advisory structures, with broadly based membership, and clear action taken to resolve partner concerns. Where this kind of approach has been utilized, proposals have reflected a mixture of research directions and consensus has been built on priorities and how best to proceed. In turn, this approach has maximized buy-in and commitment. These proposals contain plans for professional development and dedicate resources to the classroom frontlines to meet student learning needs. Of the four approaches, a majority of jurisdictions fall into this category.

2. *Authoritarian.* Some jurisdictions have reserved too much authority unto themselves. This can be extremely difficult for other education partners. The initiative is built on trust and that includes all partners. To fulfill the promise of school improvement there needs to be buy-in and consensus on how to proceed; these conditions cannot be dictated. Success will be difficult for projects conceived without the essential buy-in and commitment. The pretense of having done so is not good enough. While this approach is not the norm, it is the *modus operandi* in some jurisdictions.

3. *Excessive Decentralization.* Some jurisdictions appear to be transferring decision-making and per-capita allocations to the school level. This defeats one of the key responsibilities, at the jurisdiction level, to ensure that AISI projects can have a system-wide impact on teaching and learning. One of the arguments in favor of per-capita allocations to schools is that AISI could give some schools an advantage over other schools and that this advantage would become apparent in future standardized test results. However, decentralization risks the establishment of projects that do not have an adequate funding base to actually generate results. The education partners may be called to review projects that allocate funding to schools on a per-capita basis. Only a handful of jurisdictions are perceived to be going down this path.

4. *Fragmentation and Gamesmanship.* Partly related to the above point, some jurisdictions may approve too many projects, reducing the funding base. In addition, there are some concerns that projects will not include adequate frontline staff to make the promised improvements. Some jurisdictions seem to be investing a lot of resources into coordinators or restocking the personnel shelves of central office. At this point, funding for professional development appears absent from some proposals. In a very small number of instances, there may be gamesmanship: using AISI funding for technology, renovations or other expenditures more appropriately funded from other sources, freeing those funds for other purposes. In sum, there are questions in some instances about the ability to achieve project goals because of the nature of decisions relating to specific projects (e.g., underfunding, inadequate staffing and professional development, etc).

In the next few weeks, the actual picture will become clear. What will the finalized projects look like and what will the implications be for the 2000/2001 school year? While the concerns identified are real, the extent to which these are a concern will be known soon. It should be emphasized that all of the education partners are committed to making AISI work. At each steering committee meeting, the AISI partners effectively recommit to the fundamental principles of the initiative and work together to resolve issues.

Conclusion

AISI will continue to present both opportunities and challenges. Alberta's teachers are strongly committed to work with the other education partners to make AISI a success. The association expects to continue the dialogue, as we have for almost a year now, to clarify the initiative and to support and improve it. Although the work to date has been enormous, the actual delivery of the projects will be even bigger. That will mean even more challenges and more opportunities. If the partners can get AISI right, it has the potential to have a significant impact on Alberta's education system and we, as teachers, are eager to continue to play a role in improving teaching and learning.

Note

1. The information reflects summary notes of recent meetings with local officials (based on provincial meetings of professional development chairs [Calgary, March 17-18, 2000], local presidents [Edmonton, February 4-5, 2000], economic policy committee chairs [Edmonton, February 24-25, 2000] staff visits to schools and local associations, and meetings of Provincial Executive Council [Edmonton, January 13-14, February 28-29, April 6-7, May 4-5, 2000].

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AISI Opportunities and Challenges from a Parent/School Council Perspective

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The Alberta Initiative for School Improvement stands as one of the proudest collaborative achievements of the Alberta Home and School Councils' Association (AHSCA). A synopsis of how we got there follows.

The board of AHSCA was directed by parent members at our March 1999 annual general meeting to "lead a restructuring process which would allow full stakeholder involvement in the decision making process of determining criteria and measurement for the School Performance Incentive Program (SPIP)" (AHSCA, 1999, 99C-31). We subsequently engaged in a full stakeholder process that proposed an Alberta School Improvement Program (ASIP) as an alternative to SPIP. The other stakeholders involved in this alternative were the Alberta Teachers' Association (ATA), the Alberta School Boards Association (ASBA) and the College of Alberta School Superintendents (CASS). The new Minister of Learning, Dr. Oberg, listened to this clear opposition from ALL stakeholders, and chose not to implement the incentive program.

In August 1999, Deputy Minister of Learning, Maria David-Evans, was entrusted with the task of revamping the old program using a collaborative process. Alberta Learning invited the Association of School Business Officials of Alberta (ASBOA) to join the other associations in developing a school improvement program. Representatives of this group of stakeholders sat down together and created a new program, the Alberta Initiative for School Improvement (AISI). A draft was sent out to stakeholder groups. Amid an overwhelmingly positive response, the partners then jointly presented this new alternative to Albertans in December 1999.

You will note the change from stakeholder to *partner*. This is very deliberate and key from our perspective. As an association we have long championed the vision of partnership and collaboration and the change that took place as we worked together is defined by the change in how we chose to define our working relationship. We started out as a group of stakeholders, merely holding a common interest. We continue as a group of partners in a relationship of mutual respect and trust. It is this partnership relationship

that provides a foundation upon which future discussions about education issues can take place. For us, this is the biggest gift of AISI.

Opportunities

This partnership is not only important for our work at the provincial level. AISI's goal is to improve student learning and performance by fostering initiatives which reflect the unique needs and circumstances within school jurisdictions. It is our profound belief that people support what they create and AISI clearly provides the framework for that to happen. This initiative provides the opportunity for Albertans to be a real part of the teaching/learning process, and to play a role in creating a culture of improvement that will foster pride in public education. Opportunities for people moving from mere stakeholders in education, to equal partners buying in, abound in this AISI framework.

These opportunities are offered in two concepts that are key components of AISI. The first is the required inclusion of the school community through consultation with school councils and other agencies that affect the ability of children to be successful learners. AISI recognizes the fact that nurturing students is the responsibility and privilege of a school community, which includes teachers, support staff, principals, parents, students, and community members.

The second concept is the nature of school improvement. There is recognition that "school improvement is not a 'quick fix' activity, but rather an ongoing process that requires collaboration, commitment, and sustained support" (AISI Education Partners Steering Committee, 1999, p. 5). This concept acknowledges not only that actions taken now may not demonstrate results immediately, but that time needs to be given to fine-tune the whole new process of collaboration. This brings us to the next step in the further development and implementation of AISI, that of challenges.

Challenges

As we embark on this new way of doing business, we have heard that collaboration is a wonderful process but it is a lot of work. This is undoubtedly true. However, if we continue to do what we have always done, we will get what we've always gotten. We also need to be careful of what may appear to be democracy, but is actually the *engineering of consent*. Joyce Epstein said, "If we are to be successful in implementing effective school/family/community partnerships, these partnerships must begin to be seen as 'an essential component of school organization that influences student development and learning, rather than as an optional activity or a matter of public relations" (1995, p. 711). AISI holds within it this opportunity and this challenge.

One of the ways to embrace this challenge and find opportunity, is to describe it. This has been done by acknowledging that "there is an apparent tension between the need for 'bottom-up' and 'top-down' processes including consultation and commitment, and the need for overall jurisdiction planning and decisions on priorities" (AISI EPSC, 1999, p. 5). The challenge that we see is that there has not been enough of this healthy bottom-up and top-down tension. One of the hallmarks of this initiative is the opportunity for some innovation, creativity, and risk-taking. Risk-taking refers to two separate undertakings. First, there is the risk of true collaboration, where old methods of decision making are set aside to invite meaningful input from all partners seen as equals around the table. Second, the new ideas that go beyond restoring cutback losses, are embraced and given a chance. We are sure that this has happened in some jurisdictions and this is cause for celebration. We hope that as we continue with this culture of school improvement, we will see more of it. If the two parts of risk-taking happen, it will create the healthy bottom-up, top-down tension where the necessary discussions bring about change and a commitment to it.

As always, we struggle with time constraints. Collaboration that has truly meaningful involvement takes time and energy. When attitudes need to be changed, more time is needed. We are hopeful that the sharing of project results and ideas (both positive and negative) through the AISI clearinghouse will serve to ignite, and re-ignite, all partners with new ideas.

Across the province the level of parent/school council involvement has varied widely from none, to full collaboration, and everything in between. For example, some jurisdictions started discussing potential AISI projects with their communities in November 1999 at their Council of School Councils (COSC) meetings. Other jurisdictions set aside a day to workshop ideas with a facilitator and representatives from all partner groups. Still others presented a multitude of ideas they had received from schools and asked for preferences and/or prioritization of ideas at a COSC meeting. In some jurisdictions, the administration's preferences and/or those of their staff were presented to school councils, who were then asked to approve these choices. In these diverse approaches across Alberta, not all schools had an opportunity to see their project chosen, resulting in some hard feelings. Some great ideas have been generated, however, and this is promising.

The Future

As we look forward into the next year, we look at opportunities for sharing ideas and information via thematic workshops at regional parent conferences and annual conferences. We will continue to engage in collaborative discussions as AISI is implemented across Alberta. As well, we will seek as many opportunities as possible for celebrating successes at least once a year, in some way.

As representatives of parents on school councils, we are thrilled with the possibilities inherent in this project. It breathes life into the concept that it takes a community to raise a child. It validates our vision of the power of partnerships. It demonstrates a change in a way of doing business. Are we there yet? No. Will we get there? Yes!

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AISI Opportunities and Challenges: The Perspective of School Business Officials

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Alberta Learning invited five associations to participate in the development of the Alberta Initiative for School Improvement (AISI). The Association of School Business Officials of Alberta (ASBOA) gladly agreed to appoint members to the committees working on this initiative. ASBOA's mission states:

> The Association of School Business Officials of Alberta (ASBOA) is a professional association dedicated to promoting the highest standards of school business management in all aspects, and the status, competency, leadership qualities, and ethical standards of school business officials at all levels.

ASBOA members needed to understand how AISI was going to be funded as a new initiative and then try to have input in minimizing the bureaucracy of reporting the results of AISI projects, while maintaining the highest standards of school business management. School business officials are interested in establishing a practical link between the theoretical aspects of an initiative and the practical realities of making such a project workable in the field. ASBOA also wishes to maintain accounting and audit controls to meet Alberta Learning reporting requirements. ASBOA members are eager to participate in providing the highest quality education.

Once a new initiative is being developed, ASBOA ensures that its members become aware of the specifics so they can provide proper feedback. In turn, school business officials also provide feedback to ASBOA to express the positive and/or more challenging aspects of the initiatives. Some portions of ASBOA's belief statement further elaborate on the interests of ASBOA's membership in AISI:

We believe in:

Establishing and maintaining high standards of ethics and efficiency in school business methods and practices.

Participating in providing quality education, which is dependent upon cooperative actions of educators, school business officials and other responsible stakeholders.

Advancing the status of school business officials at all levels and providing, when appropriate, assistance to members on a group or individual basis.

Improved Student Learning is the Expected Outcome of AISI

AISI grew out of the School Performance Incentive Program (SPIP), announced in March 1999 and put on hold in June 1999 by the new Minister of Alberta Learning, Dr. Lyle Oberg. ASBOA members perceived a significant change under the direction of the new Minister and Deputy Minister, Maria David-Evans. Membership on the AISI Steering Committee and Working Group presented a significant chance for collaboration between Alberta Learning and its stakeholder groups. The collaboration resulted in the reformulation and repackaging of SPIP into something new and invigorating. AISI provides enough flexibility for school jurisdictions to establish student improvement projects.

AISI Projects
The positive aspect of having a large variety of projects province-wide is the establishment of a clearinghouse of best practices. The tool kit of performance measures will give Alberta Learning and school boards a variety of *best practice* experiences which can then be replicated. The additional funding will help school jurisdictions to commence new initiatives in schools. The additional funding will also help boards to take some risks while not having to transfer funds from regular programming.

Improved Student Learning
Improved student learning is an expected outcome from the $200 million that will be expended over the next three years. Projects are subject to approval by the School Improvement Branch. As long as the School Improvement Branch can set up an efficient process for approving projects, boards and school business officials will be less concerned if a project is not robust enough to meet the requirements to receive AISI funding.

AISI is helping boards and school communities to consider the following questions: "What weaknesses are identified in the school jurisdiction?" and "How can these weaknesses be remedied using empirical research?" Asking how we can better provide an effective education to our youth is one of the ways in which school jurisdictions are pushed to improve results in areas where weaknesses have been identified. In the end, the exercise of identifying new and better techniques for improving student learning throughout the province is most important. ASBOA members work tirelessly to help

implement programs which lead to a better education for students in the province of Alberta. If AISI provides long-term successes for our students and a relatively non-bureaucratic reporting structure, ASBOA will continue to support AISI.

Collaboration
The collaborative nature of AISI has had a significant positive impact on the *trust* factor. Even though the support for AISI is not unanimous among school boards, there is significant acceptance of AISI by members of ASBOA.

Challenges

AISI is yet another earmarked grant where even though there is a lot of flexibility in the formulation of projects, there are still controls imposed by Alberta Learning. The controls are acceptable in light of the $200 million being spent over the next three years and the alternative of not receiving the funds.

Some business officials have commented on the large amount of work required to establish the projects. These types of comments result from a certain amount of frustration with the continuous change in the current education *environment*.

Increasing the number of projects in a jurisdiction significantly increases that jurisdiction's work to measure and report improvement for each project. In cases where school jurisdictions allow each school community to submit its own project, intense administration is required to obtain and measure results for each project. The large amount of tracking and its related cost may outweigh attempts to improve student learning. AISI's flexibility may lead to frustration for business officials who work with boards that are trying to administer a large number of projects.

The open and collaborative nature of AISI has led school business officials to expect changes to be agreed upon by all partners. This is indeed the case as partners are invited to comment on proposed changes. It behooves all partners to keep their constituents abreast of these changes. The finalization of the project application form for the Extranet illustrates how expectations created for this form in the *AISI Administrative Handbook* (AISI Education Partners Working Group, 1999) and the final form created concern. Some ASBOA members think the original document layout should have been used because the Extranet version increased the original two-page submission document for a project to about 15 pages, even though the information requested has not changed significantly. There is further concern with the submission process. Some school business officials perceive that emphasis on ease of data collection has been at the expense of keeping the submission process simple. It should be noted, however, that the perceived change was much larger than the actual change.

The collaborative work to establish the jurisdiction projects is significant in scope and nature. Even though the complications are not significant in nature, they become a nuisance that no one likes to deal with at this stage of the project establishment process. Such changes can impact on the trust level that has been built. It is incumbent on the School Improvement Branch to carefully analyze every anticipated change and communicate it to all stakeholders.

What is AISI Doing for ASBOA?

AISI may result in increased flexibility in grants and greater input by ASBOA into various other Alberta Learning initiatives.

Increased Flexibility May Expand To Other Grants
There is real anticipation that the flexibility built into the AISI program is a precedent which Alberta Learning is setting to allow local school boards greater autonomy over how they expend government grants. In the recent past, a number of earmarked grants have been introduced which restricted boards and administrators. ASBOA hopes that the greater flexibility with AISI sets the trend for things to come. School business officials would welcome the relaxation of earmarked grants and the granting of funds that may be spent on priorities identified in school jurisdictions' three-year education plans.

Greater Input By ASBOA
ASBOA has noted a much greater effort by Alberta Learning to involve members in different government initiatives and task forces. This increased ability for ASBOA to provide feedback to government initiatives is a very positive way to help deliver the best education to meet the needs of students in the province. It is essential that the feedback provided to various committees and task forces be carefully considered and reflected in any collaborative initiatives.

Some Future Considerations

AISI cannot be allowed to fail. ASBOA and other partners have worked hard to show that introducing greater flexibility in funding provided by Alberta Learning can have better results and buy-in from school jurisdictions. The growing pains identified earlier are minor when compared with the intent and the scope of the initiative.

The AISI initiative is in its infancy. Now it is time for partners to do their utmost to make AISI a success. The success of the initiative will improve chances of future flexibility in Alberta Learning funding initiatives.

It is important to recognize that Alberta's Auditor General will audit AISI among other Alberta Learning funding initiatives. One should also anticipate that in the future, the Auditor General's Office would like to see the results of funding initiatives like AISI measured by output as stated below:

> **Performance Management**
>
> Ministries should now be working on integrating performance measurement into their day-to-day operations. This is a difficult and challenging task. But, it is a very important step, and has the full support of the Auditor General. A successful system will integrate information on results with information on full costs. In order to do this, organizations should:
>
> - set out their desired outcomes, and determine how they will be measured,
> - identify their outputs, and
> - determine and report the full costs of these outputs.
>
> Standing Policy Committees and the Legislative Assembly are now using performance measures as part of their respective reviews of plans and budgets. The Public Accounts Committee is using the new ministry annual reports to assess and discuss the performance of ministries. The linking of cost to results information is one of the remaining steps needed to assist users such as the Public Accounts Committee to effectively discharge their duties with respect to the review of public accounts. To make this link, organizations will need to cost their outputs. Therefore, it is imperative that organizations start to focus on identifying the full costs of outputs. Organizations should distinguish inputs from outputs, and care should be taken to ensure that they do not inadvertently cost inputs rather than outputs. (Auditor General of Alberta, 1999)

The Minister of Learning has already expressed the opinion that if the findings and results of even a small number of projects are transferable, AISI will have been a worthwhile expenditure of funds because of the improvement in student learning.

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Potential and Challenges of the Alberta Initiative for School Improvement

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The Alberta Initiative for School Improvement (AISI) is a collaborative project involving all the major partners in education in Alberta. The major goal of this project is to "improve student learning and performance by fostering initiatives which reflect the unique needs and circumstances within school jurisdictions" (Alberta Initiative for School Improvement Education Partners Steering Committee [EPSC], 1999, p. ii). The placement of the initiatives at the school district level holds great promise for addressing the issues, concerns, and needs in each jurisdiction (school district) and, more specifically, the schools within each jurisdiction.

The Potential of AISI

As I see the approach described in AISI documents, there is potential for a high degree of *collaboration and cooperation* among teachers and principals within and across schools, parents, business and industry, and the universities. In a recently completed study, Rogers, Ma, Klinger, Dawber, Hellsten, Nowicki, and Tomkowicz (2000) found that classes with students whose parent(s)/guardians were involved in their child's education, held high expectations for their child, and for whom school was important tended to outperform classes where this type of involvement was not as strong or prevalent. The authors went on to suggest "that attention and assistance should be focussed on encouraging parent(s)/guardians not already involved in their child's education to become more involved" (p. 20). The AISI plan already responds to the suggestion with the requirement that the school community be involved in AISI projects. The school community includes school councils and agencies in addition to students, their parent(s)/guardians, and the school staff (AISI EPSC, 1999, p. 5).

I see potential for *empowering* teachers and principals in the areas of curriculum development and instructional practice. It seems to be a truism that when a person or group of persons has a major role in the development of a product or practice, they will take ownership of it and actually use the product or practice.

I see potential for *success* in meeting the goal of the AISI program. Project proposals are required to be based upon insights gained from research and literature on school and student improvement" (AISI EPSC, 1999, pp. 4-5). Opportunities for students to learn and for student performance to increase will likely be greater if what has been found before is taken advantage of and not ignored. Further, teachers and principals will have a stake in ensuring that what they have developed will ensure that the expected learning outcomes are indeed met if not surpassed.

I see the potential for *transfer* and *adding to the body of knowledge about education*. Findings and results are to be shared among school jurisdictions. However, given the expectation that some of the projects will lead to exemplary products and processes, the findings and results should be shared with the wider community outside of Alberta, thereby adding to the research and literature jurisdiction personnel were required to access when they were preparing their project proposals.

Challenges of AISI

To realize the potential of the AISI project – *increased and enhanced collaboration and cooperation, empowerment, success, and transfer* – presents a number of challenges.

First, there is the challenge of *creating* collaboration and fostering cooperation. At the outset, it needs to be recognized that "everybody's responsibility is nobody's responsibility." This argues for clear leadership. But leadership need not prevent collaboration and cooperation. Special efforts may be necessary to promote the appropriate inclusion of less powerful groups or individuals and/or the "silent majority." If stakeholder identification is not done, and if stakeholders are not involved in meaningful and timely ways, a project may be ignored or resisted.

Collaboration and cooperation also involves time. There are two time issues. One issue is finding convenient times for all stakeholders or their representatives to meet. Schedules should be developed early enough so that all who should attend a meeting will be able to attend that meeting. The second issue is centered on ensuring that adequate time is provided to those who will actually conduct the planning, implementation, and evaluation of the project. Teachers must have time to plan, monitor, and, if necessary, revise what was proposed. Time must be made available to identify measures of performance that are relevant to and representative of the expected student learning outcomes of the project. Research, development, implementation, and evaluation require time. Projects should be developed in light of known time constraints; otherwise they will be impractical.

The challenge of empowerment is the challenge of ensuring the availability of qualified personnel to complete the project as proposed. The procedures to be carried out should be compatible with the skill level of the personnel available for the project or allowance should be made to provide additional training to any personnel who need it[1]. To ensure empowerment and success, project personnel who will develop or modify curriculum, organize and perform the needed instruction, and develop, modify, or select measures of performance need to be appropriately qualified.

The challenge of success is closely aligned to the challenge of establishing empowerment. Empowerment should lead to success. I would add the challenge of meeting the call for public accountability within each jurisdiction and to the province to what is presented above for empowerment. The measurement procedures chosen or selected should assure that the interpretation arrived at about each student's performance or about each class or school's performance is valid and reliable and not open to misinterpretation. Qualitative and quantitative information and data should be appropriately and systematically analyzed. Reports to stakeholders must be clear, timely, contain justified conclusions, and be impartial. In the absence of a credible accountability system, projects may become misguided, criticized, or resisted, thus lowering their probability of success (Joint Committee on Standards for Educational Evaluation, 1994).

The challenge of transfer and adding to the body of knowledge is the challenge of maintaining interest and momentum after the project findings and results are known. Provisions for dissemination, whether in the form of presentations at professional and scholarly meetings and/or published articles in professional and scholarly journals, needs to be built into project proposals. While it is recognized that not all projects will work, it would be unfortunate not to share examples of successes that will surely be found with the wider national and international communities.

Two Cautions

The funding entitlement for each school jurisdiction is based on student count (AISI EPWG, 1999, pp. 4-5). Consequently, school jurisdictions with large student enrolments will receive a greater amount of the funds set aside for the AISI program than jurisdictions with smaller student enrolments. Further, school jurisdictions with large school enrolments tend to have central staff qualified to provide assistance to schools within the jurisdiction while jurisdictions with smaller student enrolments do not. Further, schools in heavily populated jurisdictions tend to be located closer together while those in less populated jurisdictions are further apart. Consequently, it may well be that the larger school jurisdictions may have an unfair advantage over the smaller school jurisdictions. Proportionately less of the funding large jurisdictions receive may need to go to administration or outside consultants while proportionately more of the funding small jurisdictions receive may need to go to these activities. This is certainly the case in California where districts were to adopt the new standard-based accountability model

which includes both a local and state component. While larger school systems were in compliance with the new model, smaller school systems either did not comply or were only partially in compliance. The reasons given by these smaller systems were that they had insufficient funds and personnel (D. Carlson, personnel communication, April 28, 2000). It may well be fairer to work out a base allocation for small jurisdictions to which the allocation based on student enrolment would be added.

The second caution is to avoid looking for simple solutions. The education of students is a complex undertaking, influenced by many correlated factors. For example, class size is often identified as a factor that influences achievement. However findings regarding class size as a determiner of performance are equivocal (P. Bussière, personal communication, March 13, 2000). Rogers *et al.* (2000), for example, found that when considered with other variables, class size was not identified as an influential variable at Grade 6. It may have been that class composition and parent involvement, two variables that were found to influence practice in the presence of other predictor variables, took the place of class size. Should class size be advanced in a project, it is recommended that other variables like class composition and parent involvement be considered at the same time.

Note

1. The Faculties of Education at the Universities of Alberta, Calgary, and Lethbridge and the Faculté Saint-Jean, as AISI partners, are presently providing assistance with the preparation of project proposals and are prepared to continue to work with school jurisdictions over the time of the project. At this time, faculty members from the four universities are assisting school and district personnel in accessing and reviewing research and literature relevant to individual projects. The University of Alberta is prepared to offer a workshop or course over an extended period of time for project personnel in the area of measurement. To be offered at a location and time convenient to a cohort of project personnel from different projects, participants could develop and validate the local measures to be used in their projects and discuss ways of reporting student performance measured by different instruments.

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The AISI Journey: Fine-Tuning or Restructuring for School Improvement?

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Let me start by commending the Minister of Learning, Dr. Lyle Oberg, Deputy Minister, Maria David-Evans, and the Alberta Learning staff for bringing a new birth and soft, renewed nurturing to a damaged concept in Alberta schools – *school improvement.* We can all agree that in the last twelve months, the task of developing the Alberta Initiative for School Improvement (AISI) was daunted (or better still, haunted) with challenge and yet filled with the excitement of participatory opportunity. To all partners in AISI – congratulations on your insightful participation and persistence. This is, indeed, a great initiative for Alberta schools!

I read with interest the seven papers on AISI opportunities and challenges. There is little question that "bingo" has been achieved on this initiative. The Alberta education community, in one collaborative voice, has given resounding blessing.

All of the papers speak to the trust and bonding that has occurred in the process of designing AISI. A cooperative spirit has been central to mobilization of stakeholder partners. Collaboration is certainly the key, main ingredient. New relationships have been formed. This is a necessary baseline for future school improvement alignment. All have felt a certain importance in being called to a common banquet table to build a blueprint for the concept. The framework design is the result of teamwork by key stakeholders. A deliberate and innovative Alberta Learning-stakeholder partnership has been formed and heartily welcomed.

Common Themes

There is much symmetry in the seven papers. Agreement and/or similarity are offered in the following areas.

- Involvement of the broader educational (school) community. This includes students, parents, teachers, related associations and business leaders in the school and jurisdiction communities.

- School improvement is not a "quick fix". It is a process, a journey.

- AISI is time consuming and requires work. Collaborative environments are filled with time demands and added paperwork. Todd Rogers eloquently addresses the time issues.

- Leaders must guide successful implementation and management of AISI at both the jurisdiction and provincial levels. I believe this is best achieved in the five domains of leadership identified in the ASBA paper.

- One result of this initiative will be a *best practices* inventory for teaching and learning. Superintendents, school business officials and Maria David-Evans comment on the value of this Clearinghouse approach.

- The involvement of the universities as a valued team member to assist schools and teachers with research and reflection is a tremendous addition. This participation will also, I believe, be very visible and value added in the accountability requirements of AISI.

- Participation of the "grassroots" inventor. We all agree, I think, that school improvement should start with the teacher and principal and is delivered classroom by classroom. This elaboration is contained in the ATA response.

Challenges

The challenges identified should not be discounted.

- To avoid the perception of "this too will pass away" (ASBOA). The concept of earmarked grants is heavily tarnished in Alberta schools. There is a need to ensure that improvements are internalized, 'frozen' into the *what* and *how* of teaching and school delivery. Ongoing improvement will result in 'unfreezing' and 're-freezing' – this is sustainable improvement.

- Introduction of in-flight changes to AISI processes should occur in the same consultative and collaborative environment as in the concept development stage.

- The role of leadership and stewardship in this collaborative environment. How do all parties get to the table as collaborators? (Rogers)

- The empowerment and capacity challenges. Do we have the right match of skills and capacities in schools and jurisdictions to take full advantage of this opportunity? (Rogers, ATA, CASS, ASBOA)

- Are the appropriate decisions on priorities and projects being made at the right level in the school jurisdictions? (ATA)

- Is this a process of "engineering consent"? (AHSCA) I believe not, but time will tell.

- Will the funding entitlement of the per-student count reflect negatively on smaller, geographically sparsely located schools? (Rogers)

- The learning process is a complex interaction. Will this school improvement opportunity be missed or misled by some who try to mold school improvement to a simple act of reducing class size? (Rogers)

School Improvement

There are, some would argue, at least two major parts to a school improvement model: one part reflects the *what* and the other reflects the *how*. Said another way, one part addresses those decisions which guide the school personnel (e.g., provincial priorities, district policies, belief and value systems, societal and cultural norms, which curricular objectives help achieve the mission of the school, and what criteria will be used to help determine if the mission of the school has been achieved). Reference has been made to changing attitudes in schools and the school community. Attitudes grow from cultural and societal norms. The real questions are: How do you influence a change to these well-established norms to affect the desired behavior in the schooling process? How long does it take?

The second part of the model gives attention to delivery factors. That is, once educators have decided what is important to achieve, they can use a variety of strategies to get the job done. Some strategies are more effective and efficient than others. Available research on topics like effective schools can be helpful to serve as a foundation for strategies used for the delivery system.

There are four motifs that may serve as foundational building blocks for further action.

1. *Translating theory into practice.* There is much from the research in terms of technical skills and process skills that can be used to improve educational performance for the benefit of boys and girls.

2. *Showing integration.* There are ways to mesh often isolated and fragmented school practices into a more effective and efficient organizational pattern.

3. *Working smarter, not harder.* There are ways within the system to get a sharper focus on the mission of the school and to aim more precisely with the information and resources available. What business are schools in? Student learning.

4. *Thinking and reflecting*. Parties meet on a frequent basis over provocative and controversial inputs and outputs. Through dialogue, followed by appropriate action, improvements can be made.

School improvement is more than tinkering. For example, our medical profession has been one group to lead change with incredible discoveries. The medical profession, for instance, has developed (to name a few): transplant operations, control of genes and DNA, blood cleansing and purification processes, and replacement of worn-out body parts. My purpose in this reference is to ensure we are up to the challenge by taking full advantage of the opportunity presented in this initiative. Change and empowerment may *not necessarily be* synonymous in this model. But can we really do one without the other? What role should school and system restructuring play in school improvement?

I submit that the school improvement process should attend to both the *what* and the *how*. Program and curriculum improvements relate directly to what is taught. The how is related to the conditions of learning. I see a need for both in this improvement model. Therefore, perhaps, more encouragement ought to be given in the AISI model to improving structures (conditions) of delivery – the improvement of schooling!

In addition to program delivery questions, I hope that some AISI projects deal with some of the tough, yet important, questions. There are many!

- Should the school calendar be changed (e.g., more or fewer days added to the school year)? Should schools operate year round?

- Should more learning activities take place in the community and/or business facilities? Should more seamless, integrated learning occur between secondary and post-secondary schooling?

- Are students better served when designated classes meet for extended periods of time, rather than the typical 40 or 50 minute or 80 minute class period – or should some classes meet only two or three days per week?

- What are reasonable expectations for class size? Should early elementary classes be held very low by requiring larger classes later in school life?

- Should subject offerings at the secondary level be enhanced or reduced, or perhaps eliminated?

- The deployment of staff issue. Should all teachers carry essentially the same load and responsibilities or are there other arrangements – such as the medical model with a great diversity of specialization – that could be adopted?

- Could Sizer's ongoing study of the American high school (1984, 1992, 1996) in which he theorizes that "smaller is better" be worthy of an AISI project? Such a model might bring us closer to a principle of learning where instruction is based on competency and mastery rather than seat time.

- Are there ways to enable boys and girls, as part of their schooling, to gain essential skills and management skills to make for a smooth transition from school to school and/or school to work? The new skills for a knowledge-based economy are changing rapidly. This calls for inventive ways to link schooling with business skills and the means to ensure teachers are well equipped to deliver the changing workplace skills in schools.

- Can parents and other stakeholders become true partners in a school improvement process by making them part of the school site improvement team? Yes. I can cite personal experience in this type of process model. In 1993, as part of school improvement efforts within the Fort McMurray Catholic Schools, each school created a defined School Improvement Team (SIT). Parents, along with staff, administrators and, where appropriate, students were part of the team. In this arena teams discussed key questions and participated in school-improvement analysis. Topics included: value added (what is it that you are adding value to?); dropout rates versus desired rate; capricious staff absence index; cross-subject analysis; student subgroup analysis; honors, advanced placement; discipline practices; public confidence questionnaire; and school budgeting priorities (Fort McMurray Catholic Schools, 1993). (Note: A contemporary model of SIT is being introduced into the Lakeland Catholic Schools, September 2000.)

Cautions

Some cautions for the partnership to consider.

We should be careful in our proclamation of the AISI intents. I have read and heard the expression that this model will result in experimentation in Alberta classrooms. I am confident that others will not accept this as a literal translation. In the world of industry research and development, it is relatively easy to experiment. We can change and/or rearrange physical matters based on results. In the schooling process we cannot recreate entire classrooms of children or, for that matter, individual students. These acts are reserved for other parties in different environments. As a parent, and now a grandparent, I am unsettled with this perceived notion of our children being experimental participants. However, we can learn a lot from existing research and "best practices" that can be remolded to suit local circumstances. Action research projects will be helpful. Our children can be the primary benefactors in this process. This I accept and endorse with high enthusiasm.

A second caution I offer is to government decision makers who fund public services, in this case, public education. During the past three to five years there has been much written and much stated about depleting fiscal resources in school systems. Let us not allow AISI to become another earmarked grant or part of a fiscal patchwork within the educational framework. Let us be good stewards. Let us maintain a firm purpose and resolve to improve student learning in Alberta schools.

Another caution relates to the past environment of distrust and the current atmosphere of trust. Each association partner to the school improvement table has existing policies, bylaws, and regulations developed in prior times. Some of these statements are restrictive and, in fairness and honesty, were designed as a response to certain time-specific circumstances – rightly or wrongly. These cannot stand in the way of school improvement. The question to the partners is: Do you believe in and support this new AISI model enough to waive or provide a special exemption to a school improvement submission that in order to succeed must develop outside these specific guides and/or parameters?

People have already talked about the three-year AISI time frame. I urge you to think and act in longer terms. A three-year term is not long enough to integrate sustainable and lasting best practices into the process of schooling, or long enough to become internalized and "frozen" into the school and system. We frequently elaborate with enthusiasm the concept of lifelong learning. School improvement is a long-term journey. So why would we think and plan for anything less than continuous improvement?

My fifth and final caution relates to our road-weary classroom and school warriors – the teachers and administrators. Are we confident that the teachers and administrators believe they can make a difference in the learning lives of *all* school-aged children? I speak here of professional efficacy. And I refer you to some action research completed back in 1991 to 1995 in the Fort McMurray Catholic Schools (Frase & Heck, 1992; Frase & Matheson, 1992; Matheson, Frase, & Heck, 1994). The action research dealt with teacher perceptions of job characteristics: what teachers view as their primary functions; what these tasks and roles should be; and what could they be as a means to make a positive impact in the lives of the young. In these difficult and changing times for educators we would be wise to work with genuine vigor to renew the confidence of our educators on how they can make a difference. Success models are needed early in this school improvement process!

Future Considerations

If what futurists predict is correct, boys and girls in the first grade today will assume careers most of which have not been identified at this time. What, then, do we attempt to do as a schooling process during the 21st century? Are certain elements of schooling

more important than others? Who decides what should be delivered to whom? These questions and more are not new to people who work in the educational field. But the press for reasonable and responsible answers, especially in these days of accountability, is more demanding than in the past.

Today, more than ever before, educators must address both the what and the how of teaching and learning. That is, we need to be concerned both about what is taught and the context in which instruction is delivered.

So, how do we deliver our goods and materials in schooling so that it is always effective and efficient? Undoubtedly, teaching is both a science and art. We now have a growing body of knowledge regarding the scientific aspects of our profession; we can, therefore, impact this aspect of instruction. We can capitalize on what we have learned and implement the "best yet" strategies and guidelines for Alberta schools.

Conclusion

In closing, the AISI project can be a propelling force for school improvement. It has the potential to make good Alberta schools even better. The Alberta community is very supportive. The Alberta community is very involved. Alberta Learning is playing an active, key role. The school improvement odyssey is under way. Are we all prepared to be together, supporting this effort, in this journey for a long time? I hope so.

On behalf of Eric Newell and myself, it is important to tell you how much we admire your work. We like what you are doing and we are supportive cheerleaders in your efforts.

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AISI: A Bold Venture in School Reform

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The experiences of the last 25 years have shown us that changing schools in any large-scale and sustainable way is a difficult and challenging process (Elmore, 1996). Jurisdictions around the world are struggling to find strategies and processes that will result in enhanced learning for students and receive widespread support in the educational community and beyond. Much has been, and continues to be, learned about what contributes to successful large-scale reform. In this paper, I have adopted the role of "critical friend" to the Alberta Initiative for School Improvement (AISI). As Costa and Kallick (1993) describe it, a critical friend is:

> A trusted person who asks provocative questions, provides data to be examined through another lens and offers critique of a person's work, as a friend. (p. 154)

This notion of "critical friendship" is a powerful one because of its inherent tension. Friends bring positive regard, are forgiving and are tolerant of failings. Critics are often conditional, negative and intolerant of failure. Critical friends offer both support and friendship in an open, honest appraisal (McBeath, 1998).

In this role, I am drawing heavily on my experiences evaluating the process and impact of a number of reform efforts over the years. As an evaluator/researcher in a school district, I regularly conducted evaluations of major policy initiatives. At this point in time, I am involved in a number of evaluation projects (e.g., longitudinal evaluation of the Manitoba School Improvement Program [Manitoba], evaluation of the implementation of the National Literacy and National Numeracy Strategies [England], and evaluation of the impact of Teaching Time and Class Size Legislation on teacher performance [Ontario]) that give me a frame of reference for considering the work of AISI as you embark on this major initiative.

It is very clear that there are no obvious answers to the question – *How do we improve schools*? If this were a simple question, it would not be all around us. In our work, it is increasingly clear that the complexity of educational change is its most important feature. Although changes can be conceived, supported and mandated from outside, they actually happen in the hearts and minds of the people in schools – students, parents, administrators and teachers, one at a time and in different ways for each one of them.

In the evaluation of the Manitoba School Improvement Program (MSIP) (Earl & Lee, 1998), we observed a pattern of activity that we have characterized as a cycle of *urgency, energy, agency, and more energy*. Something in a school prompted a group of teachers to feel a sense of urgency about changing the way they did business. This urgency was experienced as a surge of energy that was largely free-floating anxiety that could result in productive action or tumble into despair. When the conditions were right, these bursts of energy led to an upward spiral with an increased sense of agency and productivity. This, in time, released more energy and the cycle went on.

The successful MSIP schools had experienced a *call to action* or critical incident that resulted in a sense of *urgency*. In some schools, something happened that jarred them and forced them to believe that change must be made and made quickly. For others, the realization was not so dramatic – just a gnawing feeling that something was amiss. Often this experience resulted in a challenge to how teachers viewed the world or, perhaps more precisely, their school in relation to the world. The world was not as they had known it to be. As a result, the status quo was no longer acceptable or appropriate. When staff recognize that their view of the world is at odds with the compelling evidence, they experience a sense of dissonance.

Regardless of the impetus for change, successful MSIP schools experienced a sense of urgency and responded by determining that the school must act. The urgency came in many ways but, whatever the source, the staff came to see their schools, themselves and their students through different lenses. The less successful schools, on the other hand, did not feel any sense of urgency. They were often involved in a number of innovations and interventions but their motivation was not rooted in a sense of change being necessary to make a difference.

Once schools felt the urgency to change, change occurred – sometimes in a dramatic fashion. And something else happened as well. With the sense of doing and beginning to see they were making a difference, staff members were energized. They experienced a surge of *energy* and creativity.

The energy that comes from urgency can be anxiety-rousing and immobilizing when a school is not able to respond – or it can be the impetus for action. The successful MSIP schools went looking for ways to make the changes that they felt were necessary. Because they had ready access to staff development and the support of MSIP staff as "critical friends", they were able to build the necessary capacity for action when the sense of urgency occurred. Very simply, these schools reported having *agency*. They expressed confidence about their ability to do what they had to do, or to get the training that they needed. Sometimes the training preceded the confidence and contributed to it, sometimes the other way around. Building capacity both internally and through professional development was critical to continued movement. Teachers increased their knowledge and their skills, changed their dispositions and established positive views about themselves and their role in changing education.

When MSIP teachers felt confident and knew that they could continue to extend and enhance their professional capacities, they were prepared to meet the challenges of the changing nature of education and were able to generate and sustain the energy over an extended period of time. The momentum that was generated created *more energy*. However, energy is a fragile commodity and some teachers indicated that they were tired and needed a chance to rest, reflect and celebrate their successes.

Figure 1 provides a model of the change process as we are addressing it in England where the Department for Education and Employment has mounted a massive change effort directed at ensuring that English children are competent in literacy and numeracy. The figure details the interconnectedness of the context surrounding the initiative, the nature of the policy levers and the importance of focusing on local implementation (Earl, Fullan, Leithwood, & Watson, 2000, p. 4).

I have chosen to use this model as a set of lenses for considering AISI. It is not possible to undertake a comprehensive analysis, in part because AISI is only in its infancy. However, as a "critical friend", several issues warrant attention and comment.

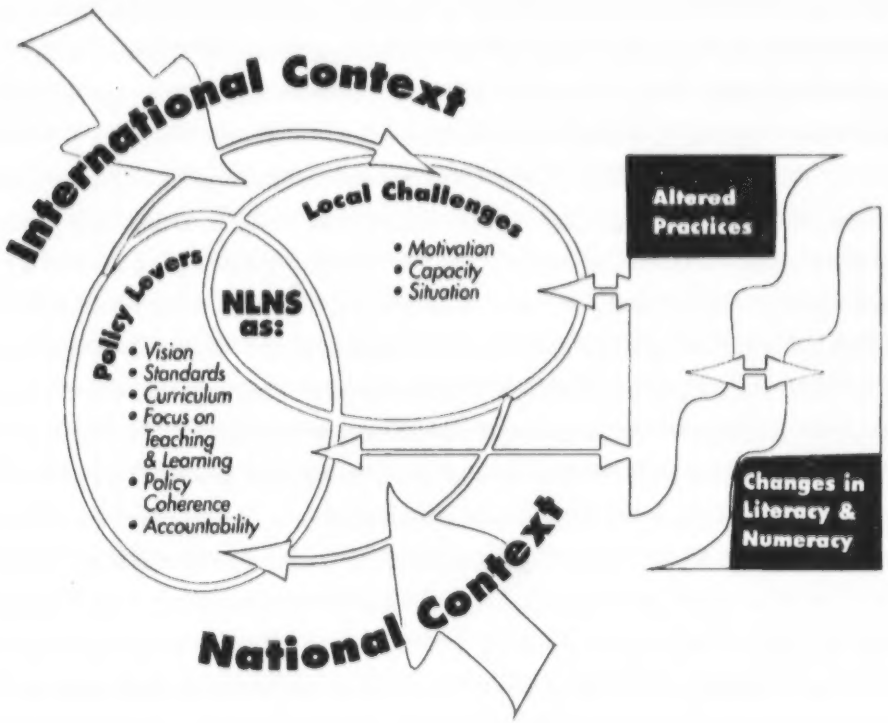

Figure 1. Framework for the Evaluation of the National Literacy and Numeracy Strategies in England

Situating AISI in Large-Scale Reform

Like many other jurisdictions, Alberta appears to have come to the realization that neither central reform mandates nor school-initiated projects, on their own, result in sustainable changes. The papers in this symposium shimmer with optimism and hope for AISI. After many years of a centrally-controlled agenda, the partners in this venture believe that their perspectives are being honoured and that together they can create workable and positive reforms. This makes AISI an exciting educational reform venture. The focus on partnerships and shared decision-making is a powerful starting place for building motivation for engaging in the initiatives. The infusion of discretionary dollars to school authorities is another important motivator because it provides focused attention to projects designed to enhance student learning, with leadership and details emerging from local needs and interests. Targeted professional development is designed to build the capacity of people in schools to implement their chosen reforms. The proposals for action that emerge from the school authorities must draw on existing research and knowledge – another strong capacity-building strategy.

AISI has considerable potential to produce the infrastructure for supporting sustainable improvements in schools. But, like any "best-laid plan", there is always the possibility of unanticipated issues and conflicts to mess it up. I have tried to identify some of these possibilities and present them in the spirit of critical friendship as questions to ponder.

Who Is Motivated? Is it Enough?
Although a great deal of attention has been paid to engaging and involving all of the stakeholder groups, the important motivation for change happens in schools and classrooms – in the hearts and the minds of the people who work there (including students). Participants in this symposium do not give much indication of how the work that has begun to coordinate the various stakeholder groups will be mirrored in schools. Unless teachers, administrators, students and parents also believe that the reforms are worth making, that they are able to make them work, and that the infrastructure will be in place long enough to make a difference, they are unlikely to feel any strong urge to engage with the reform agenda.

Altering Practices: Who Needs To Know What?
As several of the partners acknowledge, serious reform efforts will require a great deal of professional development. The questions that arise are at the heart of any reform and are deeply rooted in Plato's Paradox – We don't know what we don't know! In each project, we need to ask the questions: What are the practices that are supposed to change? What professional development experiences are likely to result in these changes? How will you know that they have?

It is increasingly clear that educators need to be serious "lifelong learners" to be effective. They need to be voracious consumers of content knowledge, even in their own disciplines; they need to stay current with new developments in pedagogy and in assessment; and, they need to cultivate the kinds of dispositions that let them stay

grounded in the midst of constant change. Building this kind of capacity is not trivial. It requires both understanding and skill. Understanding may develop through explanation and reading but skill – the ability to do something – usually requires repeated cycles of practice and feedback, in addition to understanding.

Developing significant new knowledge or skill on a large scale is extremely difficult. When reform goals require significant changes in educational practices at the school and classroom level, there is no alternative to high levels of new investments in capacity development.

Time, Timing and Timelines

Making significant changes in education takes a long time; it also takes a lot of time and it needs to be well timed.

- Michael Fullan (2000) estimates that in takes 3-5 years to change elementary schools, 5-6 years for secondary schools, 6-8 years for districts (depending on size), and we have no idea yet about provinces, states or nations.

- If teachers are going to learn about, argue about, internalize, and make sense of the reforms they need time and lots of it. They need professional development; they need time to work together; they need challenging opportunities. Somehow, AISI has to find the resources and mechanisms to allow the people in the schools the kind of time that the heads of the stakeholder groups have taken in the first stage of the improvement process. Not a simple task.

- Policy coherence is an essential part of any large-scale reform effort. When there are multiple reforms and multiple departments guiding them, it is easy to ignore the fact that all of the initiatives arrive on the desks of the same people in the schools. AISI has to blend with other requirements, not compete.

Accountability and Assessment Literacy

Large-scale assessment has become the vehicle of choice for accountability purposes right around the world and testing has moved from being an instrument for decision-making about students to being the lever for holding schools accountable for results (Firestone, 1998). School quality is described in terms of numerical indices and used to make judgements and policy decisions. This process can result in misuse and misinterpretation because of the deceptive simplicity of the numbers. Numbers do provide a useful shorthand way of describing, communicating and measuring what is happening. The challenge is to ensure that educators and the public understand both the possibilities and limitations of such information. They need to develop "assessment or

statistical literacy" in order to examine student work and performance data of all types and to make critical sense of it, and to use these understandings to make classroom and school improvement plans, altering instruction and other aspects of the school in order to improve student learning. Assessment literacy not only serves an accountability purpose, but it also becomes a major professional development and school improvement strategy. The end result is a more sophisticated and powerful contribution to large-scale reform goals. As teachers and schools get used to working with more and more data, they become more comfortable and more likely to question underlying assumptions — they become less susceptible to naïve conclusions based on numbers and more likely to use sound data as a basis for improvement planning (Earl, 1999).

A Final Word

AISI is a bold venture. But, it has only just begun. Although the members of the symposium have spent many days planning and negotiating, they have barely laid the groundwork. As we learned in Manitoba, there needs to be time for celebration and reflection on the process. In this case, the celebration must be short. The journey is long and arduous. The next step is to facilitate a sense of urgency that is rooted in genuine beliefs that change is necessary, build the capacities for productive change in schools and create the working environments that will provide long-term support, reflection and celebration.

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